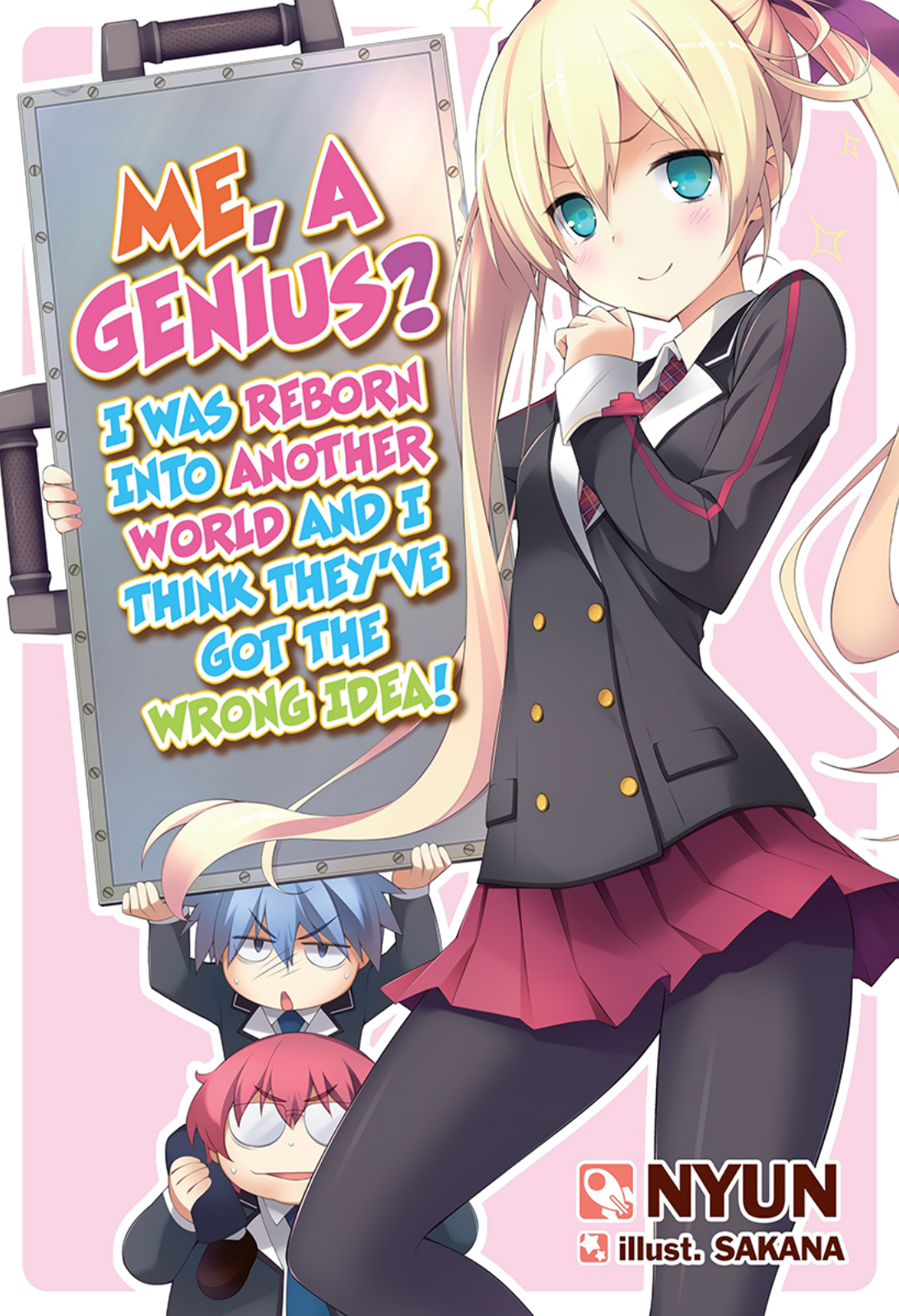




**ME, A
GENIUS?**
I WAS REBORN
INTO ANOTHER
WORLD AND I
THINK THEY'VE
GOT THE
WRONG IDEA!



NYUN

illust. SAKANA

VISIT...

LANZAROTE
Caliente.COM



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NYUN



illust. SAKANA

“FUWAAH.”

**“MEGUMIN,
WAIT.”**

 **Alice Alford**

Megumi Aikawa 





Contents



- 1 Birth
- 2 The Present
- 3 The International Science and Technology Academy
- 4 Workplace Field Trip
- 5 Everyone's Research
- 6 The Arakawa Particle
- 7 Developing a New Model
- 8 A New Family Member
- Interlude A Date
- 9 Attack
- 10 Digging a Hot Spring
- Extra Chapter Battle History of the Ghost Unit —
Take Control of Enemy Headquarters!



Kouki Arakawa



Shingo Saito

**ME, A GENIUS?
I WAS REBORN INTO
ANOTHER WORLD AND
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THE WRONG IDEA!**

Chapter 1: Birth

A very warm space, bathed in bright white light. A pleasantly airy space where I felt at ease. I was in such a place. I felt as though my mind would be overcome by a pleasant dreamy sensation when suddenly, I remembered something.

“That’s right... I had an accident.”

For the first time in a while, I’d taken a vacation from the company I worked for. The first time in a long while. I hadn’t had a vacation for eight months. In tears, I’d threatened my boss, telling him that if I wasn’t given a holiday, I’d kill myself and haunt him each night. Then I’d set out on a motorcycling trip to give my mind some rest.

That was when I’d had the accident.

All I remembered of my final moments was that I’d been riding along a mountain pass at night in light rain when I’d skidded and my motorbike had collided with the guard rail.

The reason I’d had the accident was that I’d needed to get to the next town on time, or else I wouldn’t have been able to get home before my vacation ended. So I’d soldiered on, biking through the night in the worst of weather.

It was the kind of reason that even had me thinking, *How could you be so dumb?*

Now the question is, did I end up dying, or am I in a vegetative state?

“I can speak...”

The words I’d idly mumbled disappeared off into the white space.

If I can speak, I can’t be dead, right? So I guess that means I’m in a vegetative state?

Then again, if that were the case, how would I even be thinking about it in the first place? You become vegetative when your brainwaves flatline so you lose the ability to speak and can’t even breathe by yourself. I remembered someone telling me that. Though I guessed I could be wrong...

What is this place? All right, stay calm. Stay calm. It doesn’t matter whether I’m dead or vegetative; I’m still me. So, there’s nothing to worry about— ...huh?

“Who’s ‘me’?” I said aloud.

**

It felt like a lot of time passed before I gave up thinking about it. After all, although I remembered the moment of the accident and had some other memories related to it, those were the only memories I had. I couldn’t even remember my own name; my own face; names of my family members; the name of my beloved. I vaguely remembered something about my beloved being inside a computer, but common sense told me that a person wouldn’t be inside a computer, so I assumed my memories were just confused.

On the other hand, I clearly remembered information that didn’t tell me anything about myself. For example, I remembered everything from basic math such as “ $1 + 1 = 2$ ” to advanced math that you’d learn at college.

For some reason I could hardly remember any English, but I was surprised at how much Russian I could easily remember. I also had knowledge of subjects that were too specialized to be common knowledge. It seems I'd worked as a researcher or something like that.

Well, anyhow, I doubt any of this matters anymore...

I would normally have expected that forgetting my name and family would make me feel sad, but I felt nothing, perhaps due to having a reduced range of emotions. For that reason, I felt no strong anxiety and spent each day relaxed, slumbering in this warm and pleasant space.

“Whoa! Not again.”

As I was daydreaming, my surroundings had suddenly begun to shake.

The space I was in would occasionally shake. I'd noticed it started after I'd been here a while. At first the shaking had been so slight that I hadn't even been sure if it really was shaking, but recently it had gotten much worse. I just had to endure it for a while and it would stop, but I felt like it was happening much more often recently.

“Don't tell me this space is about to collapse?” The thought made me shiver as I spoke it aloud.

No way, I don't want to leave this place... I wouldn't leave this comfortable place for anything! Somehow this feeling was accompanied by a second contradictory feeling: I guess the end is finally here... It feels like the time went by so fast.

“Oh well, I might have gotten myself into an accident, but at least I had an excellent rest...”

The moment I spoke those words, the white space suddenly became even whiter, and I was bathed in light so bright I couldn't open my eyes.

I guess this the end...

Then the world suddenly came into view.

“Congratulations! It's a healthy baby boy.”

**

“Congratulations! It's a healthy baby boy.” I heard those words as the world came into view.

What in the world happened? I checked my surroundings in a bit of a panic.

There was surgical lighting above my head and green linoleum on the floor. A woman was wearing a surgical gown...

A hospital. And this must be in an operating room? So I was in a vegetative state, after all.

Is this the first time I've woken up since the accident? Why am I being lifted up? Any woman who can lift an adult man would have to be pretty strong, right? Wait... No...

In my mind, I pictured the worst-case scenario.

No way... Did I lose my arms and legs in the accident? That would reduce my body weight quite a bit, but... Hey! That hurts! Why is someone slapping my butt so hard? I'm going to kick their ass!

“Doctor, he isn't making any noise!”

The woman who I guessed was a nurse (from her voice she

sounded middle-aged) kept on slapping my butt.

Making happy noises while some old woman slaps my butt isn't my kind of thing! Another woman beside her, who I guess was the doctor, gave instructions while watching me closely.

The hell? What the hell is this? At least give me a minute to figure out my situation!

Next, the doctor started slapping my butt.

Ah, this is a new experience... No, I need to keep calm. Real calm. Stay focused, stay focused. They were slapping my butt the whole time. *I've figured it out... I've figured it out...*

“Waah! Waah!” I screamed.

It was a conclusion so unscientific that I never could have reached it in that dreamy space. This was a tale so absurd that I thought it could only happen in stories.

Looks like I was reincarnated.

“Here, I'll let you hold your baby.” The doctor placed me in the arms of a woman who I guessed was my mother.

Hey! Be gentle! Handle me like I'm a tiny newborn bird! Don't squeeze me so hard. There's no need! Wow... Can you believe her... Wait... Is this my mother?

She was an ordinary woman: not exceptionally beautiful, but not ugly either. Her expression seemed gentle somehow. That said, I was her child, and no woman on Earth would make a mean face while holding her own child.

Huh? Did she just make a troubled face? Oh, I see. She must be worried because I didn't react in any way. I wonder what I should do. I don't know how to act in this situation. I guess I'll try smiling...

“Ga! Ga!”

Oh, she smiled! Mom smiled! All right, it seems I did the right thing. But what should I do now? I knew there was no point thinking about it; but mentally I was an adult, so I couldn't help but think about things. Anyhow, my butt hurts and I'm tired from crying, so I think I'll sleep for a while. Next time I wake up, I'll try examining my surroundings in more detail...

**

I suddenly awoke to the sound of a voice. It felt so warm and pleasant.

This is how it felt when I was in the dreamlike place. Oh, right! That was inside my mother's stomach... That explains why it was so comfortable. That was a space just for me. Hm? I can still hear that voice.

When I opened my eyes, my mother was holding me and singing a song while smiling.

Is this... German? Her pronunciation wasn't great, but I could understand it. It was a lullaby or something similar. I didn't know if it was a song she knew already, or if it was something she'd learned for the sake of me being born. I couldn't thank her, and I couldn't clap my hands. For now, I guess I'll just smile.

“Ga! ♪ Ga! ♪”

All right! She's smiling as if she's happy! See that? Mom's making a happy face. For now, I guess I'll make it a rule to

laugh whenever something happens. A smiling face will be enough to get me through any situation! ...Probably!

After having listened to Mom's singing long enough to feel sleepy, I heard a knock.

Hmm... Seems like we have our own room, I thought.

Putting a mother and her newborn baby in their own room had to be a considerable amount of work. Work meant money, so it seemed this was an environment where we weren't too constrained financially. It wasn't like money solved all of life's problems, but it was better to have it than to not.

In that case, who is this old man? He's suddenly touching me like he knows me, and it kind of hurts. Ouch. You're hurting me, idiot. Don't be so rough with a newborn baby. Look what you did! You made Mom angry. Hey... Don't get so sad. How can you be in so much shock just because Mom got angry?

Based on the things they were saying, this seemed to be my father. He had visited earlier, but I guess I'd been sleeping.

Sorry, old man. I couldn't do much else, and since he was holding me, I rubbed my face against his tie as an apology. Oh, he's hugging me with such a happy look on his face. It hurts. It hurts. Mom, it hurts! Save me!

"Waah! Waah!!" I cried, sounding a little in pain.

My clumsy old man had made Mom angry again.

Look what you've done! Wow, I really don't have much strength. In this body... I just have to cry a little and I'm tired again... I hope I can stay awake a little longer next time...

Miki Arakawa's Point of View

After learning I was pregnant, I was constantly worried. Not about becoming a mother, but about whether I'd be able to give birth without complications. My body had never been well-suited to pregnancy.

If it had happened just 30 years earlier, I would have said it was impossible. However, it was no longer impossible with modern medical technology. I talked it over with my husband, Shuichi, many times. Shuichi had said he didn't want children, and all he wanted was to be by my side. I was so happy that I cried, but still, I wanted the love between us to bear fruit.

After telling Shuichi of my selfish desire, I received cutting-edge medical treatment, and a new life started developing inside me. I was so happy, I felt such love, and I couldn't stop myself from rubbing my stomach as it grew larger with each passing day. Then came today: the day my child was finally born.

After enduring the pains of labor to give birth to Kouki, in that moment, I was filled with fear.

"Doctor, he isn't making any noise!"

The nurse, Takigawa, was frantically slapping Kouki on the behind, but Kouki remained silent. Even I could feel the tension that struck the operating room.

"Doctor, please! Save my baby! Please, save Kouki!"

I wonder if she could hear me clearly? I doubt I was able to speak properly because of worry and my fear of losing Kouki. When the doctor held Kouki and began slapping his behind, he finally cried for the first time. I relaxed and felt my consciousness

slipping away due to exhaustion, but I couldn't let that happen until I'd held my child.

“Here, I'll let you hold your baby.”

I held Kouki for the first time... and was gripped by fear.

Those weren't the eyes of a child... Those eyes were like black, round holes. Those eyes were devoid of emotion; the eyes of someone inspecting an experimental subject.

I shivered and felt goosebumps forming on my skin. I was filled with an awful feeling that seemed to grip my very heart. Overcome by terror, I was about to throw Kouki away from myself.

“Ga! Ga!” Kouki laughed.

He laughed innocently as if recognizing me as his mother. I was relieved, but at the same time, I hated myself. Just a moment ago I had felt something unthinkable toward my child. He'd worked hard to be born and even now was striving to live, and yet I had felt disgust toward the child that I loved so much.

I smiled awkwardly, not knowing whether Kouki had felt it as he fell asleep in my arms. At that moment, I made a decision.

Even if the entire world rejects Kouki, I'll always protect him.

As his mother, I decided that I would never allow this child to be unhappy.

I sang a song while holding the sleeping Kouki. It was a lullaby that I'd hastily memorized for the child's sake. In my arms, Kouki's breathing changed... It seemed he'd woken up. Perhaps my voice had been too loud? With that thought in my mind I examined his face.

“Ga! ♪ Ga! ♪”

He was laughing as if he wanted me to sing more. Even though there was no way a child who had only just been born could understand German... I put more of my heart into it and continued to sing.

**

My mother gave me an upbringing filled with love, and before I knew it, I had turned 15. Not even in my past life had I felt that time was passing so fast. However, by that point, I had learned a fact that made the passage of such an extent of time feel trivial.

As a result of gathering information for ten years starting from the age of five, at which point I had been able to act under my own free will, I learned something that was enough to make me fall ill for a while.

It seemed that here on the third planet in orbit around the sun, known as Earth, the current date and time in Japan was... January 4, 2102, at 10:52 AM.

It seemed I'd been born almost 90 years further into the future than the Japan where I'd lived prior to my reincarnation.

Despite that, there weren't any flying cars, nor was there personal teleportation technology. But the first time I saw military-use powered suits on TV, I got excited and asked Mom, *Are they robots? Hey, are those robots?* There were also other unique pieces of futuristic equipment and laser weapons that could just barely be carried by an individual.

How could civilization be so different after just 90 years? In the 2010 that I'd lived in, civilization had more or less ceased to progress. Some scholars had even gone so far as to publicly state that we were headed for a slow decline. I was about three years

old when I started to wonder about that. So I slipped away to go looking for history-related books at the library while Mom was choosing a picture book for me.

Mom caught me while I was still searching, but she got the idea that I was interested in the photographs published in history books, and started regularly putting electronic books full of landscapes and beautiful castles on my personal terminal.

My mother is oh so kind! But, I don't want these books...

Well, now, many subtle differences had arisen since the Middle Ages, but let's go over some things that were definitely different from the world I'd lived in, in order.

1935: The Outbreak of World War II.

Although the war had started four years earlier than in true history, it had ended after a mere one-and-a-half years. This was because America, Russia, Germany, and Japan had successfully manufactured nuclear weapons at roughly the same time. Initially, Japan had successfully executed the attack on Pearl Harbor and occupied Hawaii, but Japan had still been within range of nuclear weapons, since bombers could arrive there from the Aleutian Islands.

Despite Japan losing the war, American forces agreed not to land on Japan under the condition that Japan fully withdrew from Hawaii. Although an arms reduction and a reworking of the constitution took place, the lack of unconditional surrender meant that national sovereignty and a large number of human lives were protected. This of course meant that nuclear weapons were not used on Japan.

After avoiding what should have been a prolonged war with no clear victor, nations of the world were able to use their abundant

national power and productivity to advance technology.

1950: *Apollo 3* Successfully Landed on the Moon.

Mankind had reached the moon more than 20 years early. On a related note, 70% of civil aviation companies were using passenger aircraft with jet engines in the year 1948.

1951: The Cuban Missile Crisis.

Just as in true history, the pope passed away right as America and Russia were on the brink of nuclear war. The entire world, America and Russia included, grew increasingly war-weary, and an all-out war was just barely avoided.

1970: The World Security Assurance Pact Conference.

This event did not take place in true history. After witnessing the Cuban missile crisis, all states possessing nuclear weapons (Japan included, of course) placed restrictions on nuclear weapon possession. All nations were limited to 23 warheads.

1976: The European Tragedy.

This event also did not take place in true history. An infectious disease that arose in the French countryside aggressively spread across the nations of the world.

In 1976, the world population had risen to 9.1 billion, but it had fallen dramatically to just 4.5 billion by the time the WHO announced that the disease had been successfully contained.

1990: The Versailles Miracle.

Nations fatigued by the European tragedy made an important declaration: All nuclear weapons were to be permanently disposed of and overall military strength was to be reduced by 80%.

The United Nations Standing Army was then formed. Although many called this a victory for peace, it was recognized that this was the result of each nation deciding that virtually all personnel serving in national armed forces should return to civilian life and work toward the recovery of national strength.

By the way, the European tragedy and the Versailles miracle will definitely come up on a test. I've had to study them, too.

Well, then. Even before reaching the year 2000, some major differences had already formed compared to true history... Actually, I guess those were considered the official history in the world I'd been born into. There were other ways in which history differed from what I was familiar with; but there was one amazing achievement in particular that had been made at a time that would have been considered the future back in the period I'd lived in.

2091: Mother's Equation.

An equation that overturned the very fundamentals of quantum mechanics was published by a Japanese citizen, Miki Arakawa, in 2091.

It stated that this world was no more than a single time point out of innumerable time points. It completely proved that other worlds existed in other time points. This notoriously difficult to understand equation was formulated and published by a single person: Miki Arakawa, who was now known as the mother of new

quantum mechanics.

This person who accomplished this incredible feat, forever etched into human history, was none other than my mother. Somehow, the basis of this equation had been my childhood drawings!!

**

Early summer 2090, Miki Arakawa's Point of View

To see how well Kouki was developing was a relief, and I couldn't help but smile.

Whenever I thought about it, I reflected that he was a strange child. He never cried at night, and when his diaper was dirty, he would immediately call out to me. He was such a cute and clever little boy that he understood when something was wrong without me having to tell him. I never felt any need to worry, despite being a new mother.

Kouki had spent a lot of time watching TV and looking at newspapers recently. There was no way he'd be able to understand television programs or newspaper articles yet, but his face was always so serious. His adult-like behavior seemed so strange that I ended up playing a trick on him. I took the TV remote and switched to a satellite network broadcast.

Even then, Kouki continued happily gazing at the screen with a sparkle in his eyes. It made me laugh to myself as I went to take in the laundry.

“Uwaah! Uwaah!”

From out on the veranda I could hear Kouki's voice from the living room. Despite normally being such a quiet child, his voice was so loud! I dropped the laundry and immediately headed for the living room. There I saw Kouki clapping his hands energetically while watching the TV.

I didn't think he was the sort of boy who'd react to something this way...

Surprised, I turned to the TV screen and saw that they were

showing new powered suits to be supplied to the Ground Self-Defense Force from this year onward.

“Maa! Maa! Dey rowot? Rowot?”

Well, he is a boy after all, I thought to myself while still feeling a little surprised. I still didn’t understand the things he said. He was probably asking me to buy some for him...

“Kou, we can’t afford those.”

As I spoke, Kouki smiled strangely for some reason, but soon fell asleep. I gently picked up Kouki and carefully carried him into the next room.

**

Early summer 2090, Kouki Arakawa's Point of View

Oh crap. Oh crap. What am I going to do...?

Mom was in front of me with a fearsome expression on her face.

I suppose I'll try crying... If Mom cools off for a moment, she'll return back to normal.

“Waah! Maa! Scawy! Waah!”

While I was crying, I tried again to think of how it had come to this. It had probably started two months previously when I'd been taken to the library for the first time.

In the libraries of this age, virtually all books had been digitized as electronic books. It was like choosing a DVD at a rental shop. The only books that hadn't become digital were the history books.

I'd taken a book from one of the lower shelves and spread it out on the floor, planning to read it, but Mom had run toward me with incredible speed and an extraordinarily worried look on her face. She'd been angry because I wasn't supposed to run off by myself. In reality, there'd been nothing for her to worry about because personal terminals could be used to find where someone was these days, and all exits from the library required a personal identification nanochip. But, of course, I hadn't exactly been able to explain this to her, so I'd simply apologized.

“Maa, sowwy.”

Mom had stroked my head while smiling kindly. Then she'd noticed the history book in my hands—I think it'd been a book on the architecture of old castles—and I'd easily been able to guess

what she was thinking from the way she looked at me...

What? You're into dirty old castles? Gross! I know you're my son, but that's just gross. You want to borrow it? And I suppose I get the job of carrying the book and you back home with me, do I?

She hadn't been smiling with her eyes...

I'd hung my head, figuring I'd give up, but then Mom had taken the electronic picture book that she'd picked out herself to the counter together with the book that I'd chosen, which was as thick as any dictionary.

She's so kind... I'm sure she thinks I'm a weird kid, but she's still kind to me.

From then on, Mom had taken me with her to the library every day. Borrowing a picture book she chose and a history book that I chose became a daily routine.

One day, the picture book Mom had chosen contained some simple math problems. For some reason, I'd been interested and solved them all, and then tried making and solving some problems and solutions in my own sketchbook. And once again, I'd gone and made Mom angry, and she had that same fearsome expression now...

Well, I guess it should be safe to stop now? I stopped crying, but I had to figure out why Mom had been so angry. *This home feeds me. If I put Mom in a bad mood, the worst-case scenario is that she decides to abandon me...*

Hesitantly, I looked at Mom's face. Her expression was confused like she was in shock. I seized the opportunity to hug her, and she gently stroked my head.

What was she so angry about?

~

Early summer 2090, Miki Arakawa's Point of View

I decided to take Kouki to the library for the first time today. He was a bright child, so I knew he'd have no problem being in such a quiet place.

I walked carefully through the streets while carrying Kouki. Back when I was a child, there were still gasoline-powered cars on the road, but now they were all autonomous cars running on electrical power. The chance of a traffic accident was virtually zero. Obviously, leaping out into the road was a different story, but my child wouldn't do something so foolish.

We entered the library, and I had Kouki sit on a chair while I went to choose a picture book.

I'm curious what kind of animals he likes? I wondered. When he saw Japanese wolves at the zoo, he got really excited as if they were a rare animal. Maybe I should find a story with wolves in it?

While I was thinking it over, thirty minutes passed before I knew it. I hurried back to the chair where Kouki should have been sitting, but he wasn't there. I began to panic.

"It's okay," I told myself out loud. "He can't get outside without my identification chip."

Rationally, I knew this was true, but if I hadn't said it out loud to myself, I'd have been overcome with worry. I looked up Kouki's whereabouts using the personal terminal in the wristwatch that I always wore, and "F-2" appeared on the display.

That place is full of nothing but old books on paper media. Hardly anyone goes there... What if there's a pervert?!

I ran to where Kouki was, and soon found him. For some reason, the boy was covered in dust and reading a book on the architecture of fortresses with a serious look on his face. There was no way he could have understood it. He was probably just interested in a castle that happened to catch his eye.

I immediately began scolding him for running off just to hide how worried I'd been.

Kouki appeared to become very thoughtful and then apologized while looking as though he was about to cry. "Maa, sowwy."

In truth, the boy had done nothing wrong. I was the one who'd been at fault for leaving a small child alone for such a long time like that. Yet I'd scolded Kouki, who was just reading quietly in the library. The boy was probably clever enough to realize this, but had simply apologized. He understood my feelings well enough. For that reason, I simply stroked his head without speaking. *I wonder if I'm smiling convincingly right now?*

When I looked at Kouki, he wouldn't meet my eye. I understood why: His mother had gotten angry at him, even though he'd done nothing wrong. It's only natural that he'd feel a little nervous.

Feeling regretful, I headed to the counter together with the book that Kouki had been interested in. It was the least I could do to make it up to him.

One day, after having regretted my past behavior, I was about to carry Kouki into the next room so he could take a nap. That was when I noticed the paper beside him. I'd noticed that he had been intently writing things in his sketchbook.

But... this is...

I understood what it was. And I knew that if it was correct,

something unbelievable had happened.

This is... an equation proving quantum mechanics.

Without thinking, I grabbed Kouki and began questioning him.

“What is this? Did you think of this yourself? Did someone teach you? Was it written in a book? Did you see it on TV?”

Kouki began to cry as if afraid. I’d done it again. Kouki had done nothing wrong, and yet I was interrogating him in a harsh tone. I didn’t know what to do.

Kouki wouldn’t stop crying. I suddenly became afraid that this time, he would begin to hate me completely. However, as I entered a state of shock, Kouki suddenly clung to me. Kouki buried his face against my chest, and I recovered my state of mind before gently asking Kouki once again where he had learned this equation. It took all of my strength to stop myself from succumbing to panic again.

He answered my question while crying. “Mee, I wote!”

He was saying that he’d written it. My little boy had discovered the equation that scientists all over the world were frantically searching for.

Before I’d married Shuuichi, I had studied quantum mechanics in a university laboratory. For that reason, I’d been able to understand the boy’s equation. How could this little boy have discovered the equation? It couldn’t just be by chance. The equation wasn’t a solution that could be reached just by chance. If this was published, Kouki would no doubt become famous. But would it really end there? To have solved such a difficult problem at such a young age, it was as if he were a demon...

As the thought occurred to me, I was reminded of the moment following Kouki's birth. I remembered those eyes.

Can this child really be a normal child? As the thought struck me, my heart was filled with terror for an instant. However, I remembered the promise I'd made back then.

Even if the entire world rejects Kouki, I'll always protect him.

That's right. I'm his mother. Even if the boy is a demon, I don't care. Kouki is still my one and only son.

From there, I acted quickly. I wrote a thesis and published Kouki's equation as if I had formulated it myself so that it wouldn't matter if his equation was seen by others.

Someday, when the boy becomes an adult, he might be angry that I stole his great work for my own. When the time comes, I'll give him a straightforward apology and tell him I envied my own son. I'll apologize for being a terrible mother. I'll apologize from the heart. Even if that's what it takes, I will protect Kouki.

"If the boy really is a demon... I'll just have to become a demon lord."

Chapter 2: The Present

I went through a lot.

Anyhow, Mom is so awesome.

My childhood drawings gave her a hint that she used to perfect a new theory; pictures I drew of powered suits gave her the idea to try creating a new form of fusion reactor; and to top it all off, she designed a new model of aircraft. She had exceptional talent in so many fields.

If you ask me, she'd soon cease to be the mother of quantum mechanics, and instead would be known as the mother of creation. But if I had to say what was most amazing, I would have to say that it was how, despite accomplishing so much, she was always here at home.

My old man, on the other hand, was never home. A long time ago, he'd said he was going to Africa or something, and hadn't been home since. He should have tried following Mom's example and staying home once in a while.

You know, when I tried mentioning to Mom that *Dad isn't home very often, is he?* her smile looked so sad. One of these days, he was going to end up divorced.

That said, even Mom wasn't home today. She'd said she had an important conference to attend or something, but I'd been half asleep and not really listening. Sorry, Mom.

I'd been left at home, totally bored. We were never able to

guess when Dad might return home, so we had a family rule that there'd always be someone home.

It was a real bother, to be honest, but whenever Mom left the house, I absolutely had to be at home. It wasn't like I had any friends anyway, so I didn't care... I didn't care.

I think I'm about to cry.

I'd already finished cleaning inside the house, so I figured, why not weed our garden once in a while? It was a big garden, so unless we tended to it now and again, it soon became overgrown.

A while back, I'd seen something online about a simple weed killer that could be made at home, but when I'd tried making and using it, it hadn't just killed the weeds; it'd killed all of the garden grass and caused a lot of trouble. After that, I'd decided to always weed by hand. Mom had called Dad, and workers had arrived to replace all of the garden soil.

Come to think of it, that was the first time I'd seen my dad angry.

"I get it, you're a genius, but I won't tolerate you doing these things to our property!" he'd told me.

A genius, am I? I thought resentfully, remembering that. He said it sarcastically knowing full well that everything I ever create is a failure! That damn stupid muscle man. If he ever comes home while Mom isn't around, I'm going to get my revenge by making him a meal with laxatives in it.

Well, anyhow, we had a big garden. Really big. It was as big as the garden of an old samurai house. Likewise, the house itself was pretty big, too.

Naturally, Mom made an insane amount of money. She had

over 200 patents, and she was so highly regarded that research institutions begged her to let them put her on their member list, even if she was a member in name only. They came crying to her because having my mom listed as a part of their institution would triple their funding.

Incidentally, my dad's income was a bit of a mystery.

Mom once told me something like, "Your dad doesn't make a lot of money, but he helps people by working with the United Nations."

I wish he'd show some of the same generosity toward his own son! Mom was really too good for that macho man. I didn't even see why he was so macho. He'd said he was working for the United Nations, but couldn't he just be a subcontractor who helped them carry their luggage? He'd said he was going to Africa, so maybe he'd be useful as a meat shield for their VIP personnel.

Well, I suppose I'll start weeding the garden, I thought. I know! I'll try using the industrial use powered suit that me and Mom made a while ago.

Recently, this sort of powered suit for manual work had come to be used in ordinary households. Naturally, this one was an all-powerful type handmade by my mom. This was a superb model that I could even wear while cooking or doing delicate work, so I assumed it had been made as a prototype that would allow all types of people to operate a powered suit.

It fits perfectly! All right, weeds, prepare yourselves!

Beep beep beep! Beep beep beep! I was enjoying weeding when a message appeared on my personal terminal.

Oh, it's from Mom...

I answered by pressing the call button. “Hello?”

“K-Kou... What are you doing right now?”

For some reason, she asked the question sounding a little worried. I gave her a straightforward response and told her I was weeding the garden.

“R-right...” she said. “You don’t have to weed the garden. You should just go inside and watch the TV. One of those nature documentaries you like should be showing today.”

No way?! Nature in this world here was different from the previous world I’d lived in; animals that had been extinct were still living here. I loved those animals. There were also creatures I had never seen before, perhaps due to environmental differences. I loved documentaries featuring those creatures, and had watched them regularly ever since I was a child.

Mom told me I didn’t have to help out around the house, so I should go and watch that program. I really was proud to have such a kind mother! I thanked her and ended the call. I cheerfully shut off the powered suit and was about to enter the house when something in the corner of the garden caught my eye.

It was a rare bird. I tried to move closer to get a better look, but it flew away before I got the chance. I shrugged it off and headed back inside.

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Louis Coleman's Point of View

I think it was about four years ago when I... when we... began our duty of protecting and observing the commander's son. It all started with an incident caused by his son.

Apparently, after being concerned about the weeds around his home, the boy had released a deadly defoliant composition into the garden. What's more, this was something he'd made himself using nothing but commercially available chemicals typically found at hardware stores.

The commander's wife had immediately contacted the commander after seeing what had happened. The commander had made arrangements to mobilize a squad with anti-chemical weapon suits ASAP. We'd laughed about it and told him to just call it a training exercise if he wanted a believable excuse.

After going to the trouble of traveling to the scene in a truck disguised as a vehicle of a civilian organization, what we'd seen there was pure hell. Although the defoliant had only been spread a few hours ago, the entire surface of the garden had turned brown, and the levels of contamination we'd measured with our equipment had informed us that the levels at the center were high enough to cause instant death from a mere touch. Despite all that, his son acted like he'd been caught playing a prank.

In other words, this young child had happened to feel like creating and using a weapon powerful enough to annihilate an entire city.

The commander had reported this incident to the upper levels of the United Nations, but the whole thing had been hushed up, probably because of a high-level political decision. However, we'd been given a mission of observation to ensure that the comman-

der's son was protected and that nothing like this could ever happen again. Although naturally, our purported duty was to protect the commander's wife, Miki Arakawa, the discoverer of Mother's Equation and the mother of new quantum mechanics.

Just now, the son had headed out into the garden. It seems he wanted to weed the garden. After that incident, the commander had sternly told him to simply remove weeds manually rather than using chemicals, and today he was doing just that...

Or so I'd believed...

I'd wanted to believe it...

The son had emerged wearing a powered suit from the storehouse. If it had been an ordinary powered suit, that wouldn't have been a problem; powered suits for manual work were commonplace in ordinary households. However, this one...

"A sixth-generation military-use suit..."

I suddenly felt dizzy. This was a weapon that could destroy a main battle tank with a single frontal blow. It had the ability to protect the occupant against a direct hit from a missile, and a single unit could go head-to-head with an elite regimental combat team. It certainly wasn't something for weeding a garden. Why was such a thing even in an ordinary household in the first place? Fair enough, this house may not be an ordinary household, but that sort of equipment should be kept in a research facility.

I sent a transmission to the commander. This situation was well beyond my control.

"Commander... it's me." I already sounded worn down when I called him.

At first there was too much noise, but eventually the comman-

der heard my voice.

“Hey! What’s up?” the commander responded in a moronically cheerful voice.

Come to think of it, the commander is on vacation escorting VIP personnel in Africa right now, I realized. It’s not like he can head out to the scene.

“Your son is weeding your garden. In a powered suit.”

In response, the commander laughed as if to say, *Yeah, what about it?* His pride in his son had been awakened.

I doubt he’ll be able to remain such an oblivious, brainless father when he hears what I have to say... I thought.

“Your son equipped a military-use suit. More precisely, a prototype sixth-generation suit.”

The commander stopped laughing immediately and told me to contact his wife. He also instructed me that if his son tried to step out into the street, I was to use my own body to stop him.

How am I supposed to do that? What can I do while bare-handed against an opponent who can easily destroy a tank? I thought desperately. But while I was frantically trying to think of a plan, his son disengaged the suit. It seemed a message from the son’s mother had gotten through to him.

He began cheerfully heading toward the house, and then stopped.

He was staring right at me.

I was so afraid, I thought my heart would stop. He might normally act like a good boy who always listened to what his mother

said, but make no mistake, this was the type of boy who would use weapons within his own garden without hesitation. *What would someone like that do after someone got in the way of their plans? Am I about to be killed...?*

Fortunately, at that moment I was using optical camouflage that made me invisible to the naked eye.

It shouldn't be possible for him to notice me... and he certainly has no way of knowing that it was me who contacted the commander. But can I really be sure of that? What if that military-use suit can intercept communications? No, it couldn't possibly...

My thoughts were chaotic as I tried desperately to think of the best course of action. That's when the son took one step toward me!

He's going to kill me...

With that thought, I had given up all hope. But nothing happened. I slowly opened my eyes and saw the son shrug his shoulders before entering the house.

Even though this was no battlefield, the thought that ran through my mind was, *I've made it out alive.*

The son had probably just wanted to scare me a little. However, I had been shamefully afraid. This was despite having made it through countless battlefields within the United Nations military special forces unit. I was almost certain the son had been thinking: *Is that all you've got?*

I was fine with that. I was content to stand and gaze at the clear sky, feeling truly alive.

Miki Arakawa's Point of View

I breathed a sigh as I received a message telling me to stop Kouki from using a military-use suit to weed the garden. For starters, Kouki wasn't the violent type. Well, that was part of it, but mostly I was sighing over the conference that was about to take place. To summarize, my efforts to protect Kouki had ended in failure.

I had never dreamed that he'd ever use the weapons we had at home. When the incident had occurred, Shuuichi and his subordinates had acted swiftly so that no real harm was done; but one misstep could have resulted in the loss of many human lives. In the end, Shuuichi had revealed Kouki's secret to his superiors as a secret intelligence agent.

The chaos that had followed was a real sight to behold.

"That's right, the new theories, weapon systems, and pharmaceuticals I've published up to now were all the work of a young child," I'd told them.

To keep society from being thrown into confusion, none of the details were ever made public. The real problem was, which nation did Kouki and his outstanding talents really belong to? That question had placed us on the verge of an outbreak of an armed conflict.

Finally, there was the summons I'd received today from the United Nations. I feared that Kouki's fate had already been decided. I still didn't know what was to happen.

What if the world decided that Kouki was dangerous and decided to eliminate him? If such a decision was made, I would fight it with the full extent of my power. Shuuichi had promised

to do the same. Shuuichi even had people among his own subordinates trying to protect Kouki—mostly female personnel, much to my dissatisfaction as his mother.

Shuuichi's unit would no doubt rise up in arms. Even so, I would always be the one to protect my son. I opened the door to the conference room with determination in my heart...

**

United States President William Auld's Point of View

A lone woman entered the conference room. She seemed to understand the nature of the declaration this conference was to make as she walked straight toward the stand filled with confidence and pride.

So this is Miki Arakawa... The woman who holds the reins and controls Kouki Arakawa, the renowned demon child. She had lent her name to almost every notable research institution, and was the originator of the most important military secrets of each nation. Demon Lord Miki Arakawa... Just how many scientists would be willing to join this woman's cause if she were to speak the words?

Her husband, Shuuichi Arakawa, was no small fry, either. There was no way that he or his subordinates would surface. They were monsters known for having accomplished a seemingly impossible top-secret operation to bring down a nation-state, albeit a small one, using a single squad. Even a great country like the United States would be greatly damaged by making an enemy out of the Arakawa family.

I spoke to Mrs. Arakawa in the most cheerful voice I could muster in spite of my anxiety and the pain in my stomach, which seemed to be about to lose its contents.

"I'm glad you could make it, Mrs. Arakawa. We're grateful to you for traveling so far when you must be so busy."

She raised one eyebrow slightly, and acknowledged me with the slightest of nods.

Well, give me a little more than that!! Are you sure that's a good idea? We're here to decide on your son's future. I'd expect

you to be a little more friendly. Actually, you're scaring me, so please stop looking at me like I'm an insect! I think I'm going to be sick. I was feeling ill from the pressure my nation and the world had placed on me.

The Russian Prime Minister was looking serious, but his legs were trembling under the desk, too. The president of China had been drinking ridiculous amounts of water since a moment ago.

Please, somebody, trade places with me and chair this conference! I thought frantically. *Otherwise, I think I'm going to have an ulcer before we're through here.*

Why is everyone avoiding my gaze...? This is bad. I need to calm down.

"For what business have you summoned me here?" she asked coldly.

Oh no! She seems upset. I hastily came up with a response.

"We'd like to inform you of a decision made with regard to our handling of your son."

This is the end... Now her face looks like the face of real demon lord. My beautiful daughter Mary, your daddy might not be coming home tonight. It seems I'll be laid to rest here in the Far East. Be a good girl for Mommy when Daddy is gone...

"Before that, might I make a brief statement?" the boy's mother asked.

Looks like I'm about to die. I haven't finished thinking about what to put in the letter to my daughter, but if I interrupt this woman now, I don't think she'll even allow me to write the letter; so I'd better let her finish.

“Thank you,” the woman said. “First, I’d like to talk about what’s possible. If Kouki were to take technological development seriously, I think he could build a perpetual motion device using items lying around our kitchen; and using a few items from the supermarket, he could build something far more powerful than the fusion reactor I built.”

That much was probably true. The most incredible thing about him was his ability to make advancements using existing items. I’d normally sneer at such an idea, but if it was him, it just might happen.

“So what do you suppose would happen if Kouki were to feel as though he’d been abandoned by the world?” she asked.

Huh? Us abandon him? What’s she saying...? We’ve already reached a point where the world’s technology could fall into stagnation without him. How could we abandon someone so precious?

“Suppose you make a foolish decision and try to eliminate Kouki...” she went on.

Now I see! This is bad! She’s got it all wrong!

Expecting there’d be trouble unless something was done, I interrupted her in a serious tone.

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Miki Arakawa's Point of View

“Suppose you make a foolish decision and try to eliminate Kouki...” As I tried to finish my sentence with determination, the president put up his hands and interrupted me.

“I have a seven-year-old daughter. Her name is Mary. She’s incredibly cute and I’m very proud of her.” He spoke those words from out of nowhere.

What does that have to do with the situation? I stopped talking and let him continue.

“But just last month, I learned she was suffering from childhood cancer. My family was in deep despair... I cursed God asking him why my Mary should suffer from such a disease.”

It wasn’t something particularly unusual. It could happen to any household. But if Kouki were to suffer from such disease, would I be able to face the fact calmly?

“Fortunately, Mary was cured four days later. By sheer coincidence, a new treatment pod had just been installed in the nearest hospital.”

Come to think of it, I had heard that anti-cancer treatment pods were being installed for civilian use. The president’s daughter had probably been lucky to have the opportunity to use one, but Mary had nothing to do with their plans for Kouki. As I became irritated and opened my mouth to speak, I was silenced...

“The name of the treatment pod was ‘Type-ARAKAWA.’ Mrs. Arakawa... the pod was proposed by your son. I can’t deny that there are those who call your son a demon, but make no mistake: to my family, he is an angel. People all around the world use his

creations to some extent. If we eliminated him now, we wouldn't be able to go on living. Indeed, I suspect that such unseemly human ideas would be a problem for an angel like your son."

I felt that there was hope. Perhaps rather than abandoning Kouki, the world would embrace him? My thoughts were confirmed by the president's next words.

"Well, then, I shall read to you our declaration."

The president's expression ceased to be that of a father and returned to being that of a conference facilitator as he read the document.

"The members of the United Nations forbid nation-states from interfering with Kouki Arakawa. We declare that his individual freedom is to be respected, and whichever country he wishes to belong to, we will not interfere. However, Kouki Arakawa's ethics are a cause for concern. Thus, upon starting his high school education, he is to enroll at the International Science and Technology Academy in Japan where he will develop the ethics of a scientist and researcher."

That day, an important pact, never featured in any public history book, was made. The pact was signed by all members of the United Nations and was known as the "Arakawa Pact."

January 4, 2102: The Arakawa Pact Takes Immediate Effect.

That day would be remembered as the day the world embraced Kouki.

Chapter 3: The International Science and Technology Academy

I'm so depressed...

Yesterday, Mom had suddenly announced that the future of my education was going to change.

Why the hell do I have to go to some technology academy?! A teacher at my middle school had recommended me to a school ranked low enough for even me to get admitted easily, and I wanted to just go to that one. I'd be able to just go to school and then return home to go online or watch TV.

I was looking forward to having such a blessed high school life, so why do I have to go to a school that's probably full of geniuses not just from Japan, but from all over the world?! Actually, I won't even get admitted...

When I'd asked Mom, "How am I supposed to get admitted into that sort of school?" she had just said something like, "Oh, Kou, they've already decided to admit you."

I hadn't taken their exams, and with my grades, I would have failed them anyway. True, I was capable of speaking some foreign languages, but just barely on the level of a first-year student of an elite high school. Mom must have used her own name to pressure them into admitting me.

This is bad. Really bad. The academy is going to be against me, and I'm going to completely let down anyone who has high expectations for me. How could this happen?

“I know you’ve had to hold back in a lot of ways so far, Kou, but from now on you’ll be able to let loose and do the things you want to do,” Mom assured me.

She had said all these important-sounding things to me, but I didn’t know what she was expecting from me! If I could do what I wanted, then I wouldn’t even want to go to some academy.

Macho Man had sent me an email saying something like, “I’m glad you’re going to a school where you can do what you want to do. Your dad is cheering for you.”

I don’t even know what you’re talking about, Macho Man. Stop acting like you think you understand how things are. You don’t understand a thing. I’d say you’re on the level of a gorilla!

On top of all that, what’s with this list of necessary items in the academy introduction pamphlet? I can understand why I’d need a personal terminal with a capacity of over 280 TB. Actually, just that alone is going to cost over 800,000, but this next item is what gets me. A personal powered suit! They must be complete idiots. A single powered suit costs over four million. No one is going to buy something like that for a child. I don’t care how common they are; they’re still treated much the same as a car. I wonder if I can really trust Mom to prepare all of this. She can be a little eccentric sometimes. I hope she doesn’t buy anything weird... I suppose I’d better check with her.

I went down to the living room to ask her.

“The things you need for the academy, Kou?” she asked. “They’ve all arrived already. Do you want to see them?”

It seemed my mom had already prepared them. We went to the garage to check them out, and there were more than a few things there that appeared to have been chosen by someone whose values were more than just a little eccentric.

“First, we have this! It’s the new model of personal terminal by Luin Corp.”

Yes. I know it well. But didn’t they only just announce it this month? It’s a quantum-computer personal terminal with a capacity of 800 TB. But this is something that they’ve only just announced. It’s not on sale yet. Shouldn’t it be another five years before this reaches consumers? I mean, I love new things, and I’m happy, but...

“Next, we have this! It’s a Quartet Heavy Industries powered suit.”

Quartet Corp boasted the largest market share amongst companies producing powered suits, and the quality of their products was considered the highest in the world. Basically, they were known as the best in the entire world. What’s more, the thing that was in front of me was probably the highest level civilian use powered suit.

Just how much did this cost...?

I was afraid to ask. I didn’t think there was any way it could have been less than 100 million. I couldn’t help but smile wryly.

“M-Mom, thanks! Can we have dinner soon? I’m hungry.”

Basically, I’d decided not to face reality for now.

After dinner, I happened to find an article about the academy while using my terminal.

This is the place I’m supposed to be attending. It was an article about the academy that I really didn’t want to attend. I decided to read it thinking it would be good to at least get some idea of what the academy was like.

While reading, something in the text caught my eye: “Ranked No. 1 school with the most good-looking guys and beautiful girls;” “The most beautiful girl contest is a regular school event!”

...Well, Mom did say I have to go, no matter what, and the teachers at my school have said that it's impossible to find another high school now, and they won't help me. I'll just have to give up and go to the academy. Seems there's no use fighting it! It's really no use! To the academy I go!

**

Principal, Kaori Yamamoto's Point of View

I'm so depressed...

The other day I had been given an instruction directly from the Prime Minister of Japan. He had told me to allow a particular boy into the academy, without having him take any exams. I'd assumed it was another politician who wanted his own kid to have the distinction of being admitted here. With that in mind, I had firmly rejected the instruction.

For me, those who misused authority in that way were the people I hated the most. In fact, it would be no exaggeration to say that that was the reason the academy had been entrusted to me in the first place. So I had not yielded to his authority. I had told the Prime Minister that the academy valued equal opportunity.

He had responded, "This is a formal decision made not by Japan, but by the United Nations. You don't have the authority to refuse. If you continue to refuse, you can be replaced as principal. I'm sorry, but please understand the situation."

What in the world is going on? I'd thought, baffled. Since the founding of the academy, there had never been such a situation. I asked him to at least tell me the reason.

"An agent will hand over documents explaining the details to you directly tomorrow. Save your questions until then."

With that, he'd ended the call.

Documents on paper in this day and age? It's not electronic data? I had thought, baffled.

My doubts were erased the next day. The agent who contacted

me claimed to be from the United Nations intelligence department; basically, he was a spy. Even after looking at the documents he passed to me, I still didn't understand why such a person would be here.

“Kouki Arakawa.” The name of the son of the mother of quantum mechanics was written in the documents. The son of a genius. However, that was no reason for the United Nations to do his bidding. As I read further, the contents of the document were incredible.

Age 4: He constructed and completed the theory of Mother's Equation.

Age 5: He designed a new type of fusion reactor.

Age 6: He completed a design for a next-generation powered suit.

Around the same time, he improved orbital satellite cannons.

Age 7: He began production of medical pods.

Around the same time, he developed a new model of fighter jet with variable wings.

Age 10: He completed production of a new model of medical pod.

In June of the same year, the United Nations forces were mobilized when he experimented by releasing a chemical weapon into the garden of his home.

Age 11: He improved fifth-generation main battle tanks and conceived of quasi-sixth-generation tanks.

In March of the same year, he experimented by adding an antibacterial product to a public pool. The Ground Self-Defense Force was mobilized.

Age 12: In February, he launched a cruise missile disguised as a firework from the coast. This was successfully intercepted by submarines of the Maritime Self-Defense Force.

In August of the same year, he experimented by launching an improved cruise missile, which the Maritime Self-Defense Force and Air Self-Defense Force failed to intercept. The missile self-destructed 40 km off the coast.

Age 13: In January, July, and November, he launched into orbit three satellite rockets disguised as fireworks from the garden of his home at night.

In November, the United Nations Space Force used all of their resources to track these rockets; however, the targets were lost.

Age 14: He developed an anti-cancer medical pod. A small number of experimental units were made available to civilians.

Age 15: In January, he experimented by operating a prototype military-use sixth-generation powered suit in the garden of his home.

If all of this was true, that would mean the person known as Kouki Arakawa was using his mother as a cover for his activities.

The agent told me that this was all top-secret information, and that there would be serious consequences for me if it were to leak out. I had no doubt that I'd be killed.

Why exactly would someone with such capabilities need to be educated? When I had asked this question, I'd been told, "There's no particular need to educate him in technological matters. We wish him to be given an education in ethics, and we leave it up to you as the principal to decide on how to do that."

Now I see... Based on the information, he was clearly acting upon his curiosity with no consideration for the consequences. Launching a missile wasn't something most people would do, but he had already launched two missiles by the age of 12. It seemed as though he had been annoyed that his first attempt was intercepted.

What in the world did he launch afterward when he was 13...? I'd love to ask him.

After having the agent leave, I considered possible teaching methods for the boy. Unfortunately, I had no ideas that seemed suited to someone whose mind got excited by glimpsing the darker side of the world.

"I suppose I'll assign him to the elite class..." I murmured.

Basically, I'd decided not to face reality for now.

**

Miki Arakawa's Point of View

I'm in such a wonderful mood. I can't believe how far we've come!

From now on, Kouki would be able to study however he liked and create whatever he wanted to create. Certainly, he had done some slightly unethical things, but he would come to understand that as soon as he made some friends.

Until now, we'd placed pressure on the school and deliberately made it so Kouki wasn't able to make friends. This had been to protect him from abductions and unwanted influences, but I was sure we'd made him feel sad. Now, it was no longer necessary to make him feel that way. We could finally give him freedom. The thought had gotten me all fired up while collecting the things he needed for the academy.

The new model of personal terminal; the first-rate powered suit; the bag; the shoes—they were all top brands. Kouki seemed pleased by the personal terminal, but didn't seem to like the powered suit.

Despite being a special-order suit that had cost over three billion, it was just a civilian-use suit, after all. Kouki probably wanted to wear the military-use sixth-generation suit he had previously invented himself. However, that wasn't the kind of thing you could wear in a school, so he'd just have to make do.

Starting with that, I was going to have him learn some common sense, little by little.

Kouki Arakawa's Point of View

After eating my breakfast, I spent an unusually long time standing in front of the bathroom sink. After all, first impressions were more important than anything!

I fixed my hair and brushed my teeth so that I wouldn't look unclean. When I was satisfied, I returned to my room and put on my brand-new school uniform before returning to the bathroom sink and checking myself in the mirror again.

All right, no problems here. I look like a fresh, well-adjusted youth in every way...

"Mom, what do you think?" I asked her, and she smiled even more kindly than usual and told me that it suited me. I checked my watch and saw that I still had some time left, so I decided to watch horoscopes on the TV.

"Kou, the car that's picking you up will be here soon, so why don't you come put your shoes on?" she called.

I didn't understand what she was saying. I'd heard nothing about this, so I tried asking her. It turned out that being my mom's son, the son of "the mother of quantum mechanics," caused some problems.

Ah, so that's how it is, I thought.

Someone related to a world famous scientist entering a technology academy could cause some commotion. I didn't want to get caught up in that sort of trouble, so I obediently waited for the car.

"What the...?"

When I saw the car that came to meet me, I immediately wanted to make a U-turn and return to the house.

It was a sinister looking, black-painted car. It was surrounded by two large vans, one in front and one behind. Just as I was about to take my head in my hands, Mom came out from the house.

“Your mom’s going out, too,” she told me before climbing into the black car, which immediately drove off. The large vans went with it. All that remained was an ordinary sedan.

Thank God! I’m so relieved!! That sinister-looking car that you’d expect some scary-looking guys to be riding in was here to pick up my mom! I thought I was actually going to have to show up to the academy in that thing...

“So, you’re Kouki? All right, let’s head for the academy.” An old guy with a black suit, black tie, and a bald head spoke to me while climbing out of the remaining car.

I quietly trembled in fear until we reached the academy.

**



“Hmm, 1-S... 1-S...” I murmured.

I'm lost. Why is this place so damn big?! Just how much money did they put into this academy? I thought as I wandered aimlessly. I don't know what to do. I'd ask someone, but everyone keeps avoiding eye contact. Somehow, this reminds me of when I was in middle school... I must have something in my eye.

Just then, I heard footsteps running toward me from behind. I turned to see a beautiful girl standing before me, gasping for breath.

I had to stop myself from drooling over her. *This is my chance to get to know a hot girl!!* Struggling to keep a straight face so that she wouldn't realize what I was thinking, I tried to ask her the way to my classroom.

“I'm sorry, Arakawa. There was no one to show you around because of an error on my part.” She spoke before I could, so I'd missed the chance to respond, and ended up simply nodding.

Oh, man... She's going to think I can't communicate.

I glanced at the hot girl and saw she was gazing off to the side.

She was definitely thinking something like, *Wow, how pathetic. He can't even manage a conversation. He can't communicate!*

I tried to relax and regain my composure. Then I asked her a question in my most cool and collected voice. “I understand your situation. Please let me know what I should be doing. Perhaps you'd be able to guide me?”

That was perfect. With this strategy, I'd made it clear that I understand the academy's situation, and I could ask to be shown

around by a hot girl. And this way, she couldn't refuse. I'll admit, it was a little underhanded, but right now, I needed to get to know this hot girl in front of me!

She seemed to be thinking about something for a moment, but then she came toward me, smiling, and told me she'd be my guide.

It always feels good to see a hot girl smile!

I followed behind her wordlessly and we came to a stop in front of the principal's office. Just as I thought we were going to greet the principal, she simply entered the room without knocking, walked to the innermost desk, turned, and smiled at me before speaking.

“Welcome to the International Science and Technology Academy, Kouki Arakawa. I'm the academy's principal, Kaori Yamamoto.”

**

VIP Escort Squad Baldy's Point of View

The situation was tense, and everyone was on edge. There were 32 members of a special ranger unit from the Ground Self-Defense Force surrounding the house. In addition, I was one of 20 members of a VIP escort squad positioned about the perimeter.

“This is Baldy,” I said. “The package will be dispatched from the house imminently. Don’t let your guard down.”

Obviously, the name Baldy was just an alias inspired by my hairstyle. Anyway, that’s not important. Being so nervous was a problem, so I had to relax a little by thinking about something unrelated.

Our mission was to protect Kouki Arakawa. From now on, we’d be repeating this every school day morning for three years until he graduated the academy. From the materials that I’d been supplied with earlier, I knew all too well just how indispensable the subject we were protecting was to Japan, and all about his unethical brutality.

We absolutely can not fail.

The escorting method we were using this time was a simple method involving a decoy. As a decoy VIP, his mother Miki Arakawa was heading out first together with two escort vehicles. It had been his mother’s wish to be given this duty herself.

Afterward, Kouki Arakawa himself was to depart on a different route in just one vehicle. Although the main subject was to be transported by just one vehicle, stealth attack planes from the Air Self-Defense Force were in the air on standby. The planes were units designed for attacking ground targets and were able to offer

protection over a relatively large area. In addition, camouflaged armored vehicles had been deployed at various places along the route.

“This is Special 1. Departure of the decoy confirmed.”

Miki Arakawa had departed as planned. Now I had to secure the subject.

“So, you’re Kouki? Let’s head for the academy,” I said to him, and he silently boarded the car.

Usually, when people saw someone with my sort of appearance, they’d have some reaction; but he was silent. He moved around restlessly as if trying to express his dissatisfaction. Putting him in a bad mood was a problem.

I think I’ll ask the intelligence department to dispatch a capable female squad member from tomorrow onward.

**

Kaori Yamamoto's Point of View

How did it come to this?! I resisted the urge to scream while running around the academy.

When I'd received the report from the escort squad saying that Kouki Arakawa had arrived, the agent had simply told Arakawa which way to go and then left him as if they didn't understand the importance of the matter. By the time the report had reached me, Arakawa was no longer in the same place.

The United Nations had told me directly that I was to handle him carefully, but things had already become a complete mess. To make matters worse, the escort squad had contacted me to say that he was in a bad mood today.

If we're not careful, who's to say he won't spread poison gas through the academy as revenge?!

When I finally found him and ran over to speak to him, I feared it was already too late. As he noticed me and turned to face me, his expression became angry. His face seemed to say, *Shouldn't you have met me when I first arrived, you incompetent fool?*

I quickly apologized. "I'm sorry, Arakawa. There was no one to show you around because of an error on my part."

He barely reacted, merely nodding his head. As I frantically tried to figure out what to do, he replied, "I understand your situation. Please let me know what I should be doing. Perhaps you'd be able to guide me?"

To tell the truth, I was afraid and wanted to refuse. Being alone with him was just too much. But his words had left no room

for refusal. Besides, if I made his mood any worse, one of his cruise missiles would have no doubt gone flying toward my house that night. My only option was to smile and comply.

I walked with him, and we had reached my office before I'd been able to think of a plan.

There's no way out of this now...

I turned to face him, and did my best to smile before speaking. "Welcome to the International Science and Technology Academy, Kouki Arakawa. I'm the academy's principal, Kaori Yamamoto."

**

Kouki Arakawa's Point of View

“Welcome to the International Science and Technology Academy, Kouki Arakawa. I’m the academy’s principal, Kaori Yamamoto.”

The hot girl—I mean, the principal—welcomed me.

Huh? Now what? Don't tell me I've been making the principal show me around. She's going to be so mad. She's totally going to be asking herself, "Why do I have to waste my time on this student?" Well, I guess I'll just smile. My secret forge-ahead-while-smiling strategy that I've been perfecting since infancy!

“Thank you, Principal,” I told her. “Please allow me to introduce myself once again. My name is Kouki Arakawa. I hope you’ll find me agreeable for these next three years.”

Nailed it! I'd said the whole thing with a smile. Just show someone a smile and everything tends to work out, so why worry? It has worked up till now, so it's bound to keep working!

I took a look at the principal...

Okay, that's strange. It really feels like I've just messed up somehow.

The atmosphere was kind of like what you would get if you asked a stunning girl at a party for her phone number as a joke, and she’d simply looked at you, confused. The principal and I looked at each other without speaking.

After some time, the principal spoke to break the awkward atmosphere. “R-Right. I wonder if you’d let me ask you a question, Kouki?”

I'm saved. If I'd had to endure that atmosphere any longer, I probably would have run home crying.

"What is it?" I asked.

This was a chance to tell her exactly what she wanted to know and score some points with her! Hot girls often have a lot of friends who are also hot girls. Besides, this was the principal who'd be taking care of me; I had to at least get on her good side.

"I'd like you to tell me a little about yourself."

"About me? Huh?" I was dumbfounded. "Oh, sorry. What I meant to say was: 'About myself? Certainly.'"

Whoa! Having a hot girl like the principal suddenly say, "I want to know more about you" was such a shock, I ended up replying carelessly!! I need to get myself together. I can't look so tense; I'm a gentleman. I need to act like a gentleman and keep control over my facial expression.

"If you'd rather not, that's fine." The principal sounded a little flustered.

What does she mean, if I'd rather not? It's a pleasure.

"What is it you want to know? What do you want to know about me?" I asked the principal while trying to keep myself from breathing too heavily.

She carefully considered her words before asking, "When you were twelve years old, you launched a firework from the coast. Why did you do it?"

Hm... twelve years old? Did I really do that? More importantly, how does she know things about me that I don't even remember myself? I guess it doesn't really matter. Let's see if I can

remember... Fireworks... Oh! That thing? She must mean the time when Macho Man was at home for once and he showed me one of the rocket firework assembly kits that he uses at work.

That had been Macho Man when he was working in remote regions like Africa and the Amazon. I think he had said he used them to drive away wild animals, but I'd only half listened to his story. Anyhow, the problem was that they'd flown at such high altitudes that they were easily spotted.

After he told me about it, I'd tried launching one from the coast, and it'd flown to a height of 80 meters. I could certainly see how it would be spotted while flying at such a height.

I'd talked to Mom about it, and she'd said that the height could be reduced if the speed was increased.

"Like this?" I'd asked, while sketching the shape of a firework and how it might look while flying.

I'd shown her my sketch, and after about half a year, she'd created a new firework. The firework made by my genius mom could fly at a speed of 1,200 km/h at an altitude of less than two meters and could automatically navigate around obstacles. When I'd tried launching that one from the coast, it had disappeared over the horizon with incredible speed.

Come to think of it, I clearly remembered that there'd been a bunch of lights randomly flying around that night; fighter planes, I guessed. I gave the principal a basic summary and she nodded appreciatively.

All right, she's impressed that I'm a great son who's considerate enough to work with his mom to help out a good-for-nothing father like Macho Man! I'm bound to score points with this.

"Well, what about the ones you launched from your garden

when you were thirteen?” she asked.

That time it had started with one of the girls Macho Man works with telling me she wanted to see the Earth. She was always taking good care of Macho Man; so I’d discussed it with Mom, and she’d improved the rocket firework she’d made earlier.

We’d launched it with a small artificial satellite—handmade by Mom—loaded onto it. I remembered the girl had been happy when we’d sent her the image of our blue Earth from the satellite. She’d gotten all excited, saying, “You can even see the small details clearly!” Our hard work had paid off.

By the way, besides that satellite, I’d secretly launched another two rocket fireworks without telling Mom, but that was a secret.

“You won’t tell me about the things you launched besides the satellite?” she asked.

No way, anything but that! I absolutely can’t tell... Her eyes are filling with tears like she really wants to know, but there’s no way I can tell her!! I have to get her off the subject somehow.

Just then, there was a knock at the door.

“Principal, it’s almost time for the school entrance ceremony to start.”

With perfect timing, a glamorous, blonde-haired older girl entered and called out to the principal.

**

Kaori Yamamoto's Point of View

“Welcome to the International Science and Technology Academy, Kouki Arakawa. I’m the academy’s principal, Kaori Yamamoto.”

The boy responded mockingly, “Thank you, Principal. Please allow me to introduce myself once again. My name is Kouki Arakawa. I hope you’ll find me agreeable for these next three years.”

He was no doubt displeased with me. His face said: *I figured that out from the look on your face and the atmosphere in this room. Haven’t you at least realized that? Stupid woman...*

Somehow, I had to break the awkward silence. Out of desperation, I found a way out of the situation, but would soon wish I hadn’t.

“R-Right. I wonder if you’d let me ask you a question, Kouki?”

I had no idea what I was saying. My brain wasn’t functioning, and I couldn’t understand my own words. He urged me to continue with a false smile. I continued to speak, as if possessed by a devil.

“I’d like you to tell me a little about yourself.”

I was shocked by my own words. *How could I say such a thing?!* I’d just said something to the boy in front of me that I probably never should have said. His face was stern, but he complied.

Would I be better off backing out right now? The question weighed on my mind. On the other hand, as a researcher, my natural curiosity had been sparked and couldn’t be suppressed.

The demon child...

I remembered that that was what they called this boy. If I continued this discussion any further, there would be no going back. Not to mention, my role was to help hide this boy's true form. Even so, I didn't care. More than anything, I wanted to know the truth.

"When you were twelve years old, you launched a firework from the coast. Why did you do it?"

He answered my question with a grin.

After being advised of the shortcomings of cruise missiles used by his father and launching one himself, he'd found they fell far short of his requirements. He'd therefore designed an improved model and asked his mother to produce it.

The completed missile had had capabilities far superior to anything that already existed. It seems he'd regarded the desperate attempts by self-defense forces to intercept the missile and retain their dignity as being mere child's play.

He confirmed this by saying, "I clearly remember the lights of the fighter planes that appeared that day."

Clearly, he'd been confident that these were no more than an annoying swarm of flies, powerless to stop him. As a researcher, I felt some admiration for his absolute confidence in his own creation, and I simply nodded.

I also tried asking about the rocket he launched when he was thirteen. It seems the rocket he'd launched from his garden was a spy satellite. If his father's colleagues had wanted a spy satellite so badly, they probably had links to the intelligence branch of the United Nations armed forces. So for such a person to have exclaimed, "You can even see the small details clearly!" the capabili-

ties of the satellite had no doubt been far beyond existing satellites.

Not only that, he'd reportedly launched three of them. I asked about the others, but he immediately told me it was a secret. It might have been my imagination, but he seemed a little agitated. In a low voice, he continued by letting it slip that it would all be over if anyone found out.

This was something that could cause even this person to become agitated to such an extent that he'd hid the thing by launching it into space...

I could think of only one possibility: A weaponized virus.

I was absolutely certain.

An unmanageable virus that was highly infectious or highly lethal—most likely both—had been discarded in outer space. I felt like I might cry. Not even the creation of something unmanageable by humanity was enough to faze him...

Are lessons in ethics really going to be enough? I looked at him, wondering.

Just then his appointed class teacher, Roberta Scarlet, entered the room and announced, "Principal, it's almost time for the school entrance ceremony to start."

**

Roberta's Point of View

I glanced at the boy walking alongside me as I guided him and the principal.

He was the strangest person. Most boys would stare at my breasts, but he did nothing of the sort. In fact, he seemed completely uninterested in me as he walked by my side. This had never happened before and I was a little perplexed.

I could hardly ask him, "Aren't you going to take a look at my breasts?" so I continued leading them.

The principal had said that this boy would be joining the class I was assigned to, but I still had little idea of what kind of boy he was. I wanted to take the opportunity to find out at least a little about him, but I didn't know what to say to him, so I simply led them to the assembly hall.

Once there, I showed him to his seat and then went to take my own seat.

I wonder if I'll be able to instruct a student like this strange first-year boy? I'm a little nervous...

**

Kouki Arakawa's Point of View

The older girl showed me to my seat in the assembly hall, and I sat down.

Wow, those boobs were huge, I thought.

I figured she'd catch me if I looked at them, so I walked just a little behind her, tantalized by the sight of her breasts in the corner of my eye. When you walk like that, it appears to the girl as though you're right by her side and just looking forward, so try it next time you want to steal a glance at someone's breasts. Just don't blame me if you get caught...

Anyhow, the ceremony was about to start. This was the beginning of my life at the academy, and yet there was barely anyone around me. Although the seats seemed to be arranged into classes, there were only fifteen people nearby.

Every other class had about forty people. What's more, our class only had three boys. One of them had been making a "Buh hee! Buh hee hee!" laughing sound for awhile now. He seemed like someone to avoid; the type of person I was better off not associating with.

I also saw a long-haired girl sitting in the front row. From where I was, I could only see the side of her face, but I thought she was fairly cute. Everyone else seemed fairly normal.

We weren't in a video game world or anything like that, so of course there weren't any pink-haired girls, and none of the girls had tails or animal ears.

Well, that's reality for you. If I ever get reincarnated, I want to be born in another world where I can cheat my way into my

own harem... Wait, this already is another world. The history is different from my world.

I was zoning out thinking about these stupid things when an old guy acting as chair announced, “Next, we’re going to greet the new students. Our representative for new students, from the elite class, is... Megumi Aikawa.”

Wow, there’s an elite class? I guess it really is a world-renowned academy, after all. I was feeling a sense of admiration when the long-haired girl in my line of sight stood up. Huh... She’s getting up? Don’t tell me that this is the elite class?! You’ve got to be kidding me! Why would they put me in the elite class?!

While I was getting into a panic, Aikawa had taken the stage.

Wow, she really is cute. Wait! Forget that.

I decided that when this was over, I’d go to the principal and ask to be switched to an ordinary class, because this clearly wasn’t the right class for me.

Huh? Aikawa is looking right at me. Why is she looking at me? She really is just glaring straight at me; did I do something wrong? I can’t take it anymore... This is all too much. I want to go home.

**

Megumi Aikawa's Point of View

At the invitation of the academy's vice-principal, I climbed on stage. As I gave my speech and looked at the students, a male student caught my eye.

Kouki Arakawa...

The son of the genius Miki Arakawa. He'd been admitted to the academy without even taking the exams. Every other student had taken the exams and achieved appropriate scores before being admitted, but for some reason he hadn't. He was here simply because his mother was a genius. Though it did seem likely that the son of Miki Arakawa would be an exceptional student.

What if he isn't? If an ordinary person has entered the academy and joined the elite class, I'm not going to stand for it! Unless he has exceptional talent, I'll drive him out of this academy immediately! Once this ceremony ends, I'll talk to him and put things right.

I carelessly glared at him while thinking that over...

**

Kouki Arakawa's Point of View

After the opening ceremony ended, I found my classroom and took a seat.

Thank God they had a proper seating chart on the wall...

The only problem was, the one who made “Buh hee!” noises, known as Saito, had the seat next to mine. The minute I sat down, I took my terminal from my bag and started reading a book, so it wasn’t a problem.

There’s at least one guy like that in every class. At least there are no delinquents in this academy, so I shouldn’t get bullied.

I was spacing out when a voice suddenly called out to me, “Arakawa, do you have a moment?”

I turned and saw Aikawa.

She’s the one who was glaring at me just now, but I haven’t even done anything. I was just thinking I’d like to get to know her, so if that’s all she wants, that would be great!

“You want something?” I asked, and then she started speaking angrily.

“Arakawa, you might think you’re special because you’re the son of Miki Arakawa, but this is the International Science and Technology Academy. And this is the elite class. Do you understand? Everyone here is special! I want you to understand that you’re not the only one who’s special here. Did you really not take any of the exams? That’s what I’ve heard. Actually, forget it! I don’t even want to hear your excuses. Every other student actually had to pass exams to get here! Are you really talented enough to deserve to be here? The first exam is next week, so please make

sure you rank in the top 10 out of our year group. If you can't manage that, do the decent thing and leave the academy. Bye."

Then she stalked off.

Wow, I thought, amazed. Did she really just rant at me until she was satisfied and then walk away? I think that's the first time I've ever seen anyone so genuinely hysterical. I guess there are a lot of crazy geniuses out there like Aikawa and my mom. Anyhow, there's just no way I can rank in the top 10 for the school year at this academy. Am I going to have to quit the academy?

For just a moment, those thoughts troubled me.

Then I decided, I couldn't care less about her! Ordinary students can't just go making decisions about another student's future. I don't know who she thinks she is, saying all those things after the way she glared at me. I might be a gentle person, but I'm going to end up kicking her ass!

I didn't actually say any of those things to her... I was a gentleman, after all.

Aikawa's threats don't scare me in the slightest because I'm a gentleman! I told myself.

While I was still being troubled by these thoughts, homeroom ended, and everyone began to move out.

I guess we're finishing in the morning because it's the opening ceremony day. I'm tired, so I guess I'll just get some lunch at the cafeteria and then go straight home.

Now seemed like a good opportunity to make friends.

I should ask someone to eat with me. I wonder if anyone

would even be willing to eat with me just after I've been yelled at by Aikawa?

I looked straight ahead... everyone avoided eye contact.

I looked to the right... everyone avoided eye contact.

I looked behind me... just some lockers and a wall.

I looked to the left... I made eye contact with Saito.

Saito is looking right at me!

**



Shingo Saito's Point of View

Arakawa was a nice guy. He was kind enough to eat lunch with someone like me.

I didn't know what to talk about, so I tried talking about some animal-related trivia I'd learned from the giant bulletin board that I was always reading on my personal terminal. I didn't think he'd actually be interested. I figured it would end with me being made fun of, like always. However...

"No way! You telling me that if you turn a pigeon upside down, they get confused and can't move?!" he cried, taking an interest right away.

I got really into it and told him some more, and he showed interest in those things, too.

"You're kidding! How would someone even find out that all polar bears are left-handed?"

After finishing lunch, I was about to go home when Arakawa asked me for my email address and portable terminal number. I was overjoyed to tell him. Before I headed to my car to return home, Arakawa even said I should contact him if I ever needed anything.

Up until now, I'd always been bullied. This was the first time I'd made a friend. I hated being bullied, so trying so hard to get into an academy with no delinquents had really paid off!

A weird girl called Aikawa had picked a fight with Arakawa, but I was sure that was just a one-off. On the other hand, if anything really bad did happen, I'd expose it on the bulletin board.

I thought I'd perhaps send Arakawa an email that night to tell

him the URL of a website with lots of interesting trivia, and I returned home from school with a spring in my step for the first time in my life.

**

Kouki Arakawa's Point of View

Saito seemed like a really great guy! He taught me a ton of trivia that I didn't know.

Sorry for assuming you were a weirdo at first, let's eat together again tomorrow, I thought happily.

When I got home and told Mom about it, she smiled and said, "I'm so glad you've made a friend."

It seemed I'd made a friend for the first time in my life.

Before I went to bed, I got an email from Saito with about 20 URLs to websites containing lots of trivia.

I was gradually drifting off while looking at them, when I remembered... I'd forgotten to ask them to change my class.

Oh, well... At least I'm in Saito's class.

**

Today we had nothing other than a health checkup and an explanation about what we'd be learning in lessons. It seemed we wouldn't be studying at the academy for real until next week... The explanation ended early, and students were told to use the leftover time to get to know each other.

"Buh hee! Buh hee hee!" Saito was there in front of me.

Don't get me wrong; it wasn't that I disliked him. It was just that we were two boys sitting in a sunny cafeteria drinking coffee. I wanted to go talk to a girl on the other side of the cafeteria who didn't stand out much, but I couldn't exactly leave Saito. Male friendship was about dedication! At least that was what Macho

Man had told me. Even though the only thing he seemed dedicated to was his muscles.

“So the latest models of military-use powered suit are the first ones to have escape mechanisms?” Saito asked me, sounding all fired up.

I told him that was correct and explained some of the concepts behind the new powered suit my mom had invented. For some reason, Saito seemed to love anything military-related.

I’d only mentioned it absentmindedly, so I told him more about the military-use powered suit my mom had invented, and he really took an interest.

Previous military-use models hadn’t been fitted with escape mechanisms, just like Saito had said. Mom had seen one of my drawings of a powered suit with a person jumping out of the back and had asked, “What is this?” When I’d explained that it was an escape mechanism, she was so stunned that she became frozen.

After Mom had rebooted herself, she’d laughed and told me that such a thing wasn’t necessary. After all, she’d explained, military strategies used on the battlefield generally involved infiltrating an enemy camp with a single unit, so leaving the powered suit would mean instant capture or death.

“No, no! I’m not buying it,” I’d said. *“Escape mechanisms are totally necessary.”*

Then I’d zealously explained their necessity to Mom.

1. The cost of training pilots.

2. The stress reduction that results from being confident you can escape.

3. The benefit of information taken back after escaping.

There were other reasons, but reason three had been the most important.

Even after I'd explained this, she'd continued bothering me with her reservations about what would happen after abandoning the powered suit, so I'd blurted out, "Well, why not just wear another powered suit under the powered suit?"

The moment I spoke the words, she'd responded with an "Ah..." and then disappeared to her room for half a day. Then she'd finally emerged and asked, "Kou, what do you think of this?!" while showing me the new powered suit.

There was a reinforced exoskeleton to be worn before equipping the main suit. The idea was that the top half of the suit could be manually wrenched open from the inside, allowing the pilot to escape. To be honest, it was lame...

"No, something more like this," I said. "Can't all the components just pop off at once?"

Mom had been depressed by my reaction and headed back to her room. Then, several hours later, she'd reappeared just as I was getting worried that it was almost lunchtime, and she'd shown me another design while explaining it to me.

"Well, what about this?! All the parts are blown off by igniting gunpowder in the seams. With this system, you can even attack using the parts that fly off before escaping."

"Yes, like that! This is the one! It's cool. It's ground-breaking."

Mom had accepted the praise and begun preparing dinner happily.

“Though, at the same time, why not make it so each part can be easily replaced when it breaks?” I’d asked.

In the end, dinner wasn’t made until it was late at night. The finished product was the prototype sixth-generation military-use powered suit ARAKAWA, known as the Arakawa model. The Arakawa model was currently being used as a reference for military-use powered suits developed around the world.

“But Arakawa, wouldn’t that make you the one who came up with the concept of the new powered suit?!” Saito cried, rising from his chair.

He was wrong. All I’d done was make suggestions, and even if I hadn’t made those suggestions, Mom would have been able to come up with those ideas herself. The true creator of the powered suit was my mom herself.

“You’re sure about that?” Saito asked.

“Yes, Saito. If I went around saying, ‘It was all down to me!’ I wouldn’t be able to go on living with my mom. It would be completely immoral. Listen closely, this is someone who built a nuclear fusion reactor at home in her spare time.”

With that, Saito seemed to accept what I was saying.

More importantly, isn’t that your third cake? I thought. They’d told him during the health checkup that he was overweight. *Have some self-awareness...*

Shingo Saito's Point of View

When Arakawa told me about the powered suit, I was shocked. I'd been sure it had been created by Arakawa's mom, but it seemed Arakawa had thought of it. He'd explained it to me like it was nothing.

I wasn't sure if Arakawa even realized. Manufacturing suits to increase the longevity of each component had been completely different from the concepts of any other suit up to that point. For example, until now, it had taken weeks to repair heavily damaged suits, but replaceable parts had made it so the process was finished in hours. I was what you might call a military geek, so I knew just how important that was.

To put it briefly, unlike other models of suits, the Arakawa model suit could be loaded with a bazooka or with a machine gun just by exchanging the arm, so a single unit could act as a replacement for various different suits.

Yet, rather than bragging about his achievement, Arakawa humbly said, "It was my mom who made it; I did nothing."

I was sure that Arakawa was downplaying his achievements for the sake of someone useless like me. I didn't mind at all that he was showing such concern; it made me happy.

That's why I simply replied, "Oh, is that so?"

It was hard to keep from smiling wryly! It was so amazing, after all. I ate my third cake with a grin on my face.

Alice Alford's Point of View

Arakawa and Saito were sitting nearby. It seemed the conversation had switched from trivia to powered suits.

I wanted to join in. I'd never really stood out at all, so I'd had trouble making friends. It wasn't that I hadn't had any; it was just that my friends didn't stand out, either. Teachers would often forget we existed during lessons outside of the school, and we'd be left behind.

This orange juice I'm drinking is kind of bitter...

That's why, today, having just entered the academy, I wanted to make my presence felt and work hard at making friends. But before I knew it, I'd ended up by myself as always. I was trying my best, but every student in the academy had a strong sense of individuality (in a good way), and they were way above my level.

I have to do something! I thought to myself while listening to their conversation, but I couldn't find the right timing to start talking to them. Even if I was to go over there, they were talking about powered suit stuff that I didn't understand. Pretty much the only thing I could talk about was pharmaceuticals, which happened to be my specialist subject...

While I was thinking about it, the conversation seemed to have switched to a lighter topic. Saito had started eating a cake, so I made up my mind to get up and go talk to them.

Kouki Arakawa's Point of View

“Hey, mind if I talk to you?”

Without me noticing, a super cute girl had appeared in front of me.

“Huh? Who’re you?” I asked the girl, while suppressing the eagerness growing inside me.

Saito got excited and laughed like, “Buh hee hee hee!”

Cut that out, I thought sternly. *Get yourself together.*

“I’m Alice. We’re in the same class... Do you remember me?”

There was a girl this cute? I don’t remember her.

Likewise, Saito replied with, “Buh hee?”

That “buh hee” makes it sound like you’re making animal noises...

In response to our awkward expressions, she simply said, “I don’t mind. I... don’t really stand out.”

I’m so sorry, Alice! I didn’t mean it like that, I thought in horror. *Come on, Saito! You should apologize, too!*

We gave her our frantic apologies and she replied, “Um... Please be my friend!”

This is it! This is it, this is it, this is it! Just what I was waiting for. I had started to think I’d go through my academy life with Saito as my only friend.

Just as I tried to respond, Alice tilted her head and said,
“Would you be okay with that, Saito?”

“Buh hee?!”

Saito!! I'll never ever forgive you!

“You too, Arakawa. Would you be okay with it?”

Sorry, Saito. You're forgiven... Sorry for getting carried away by myself.

**



Alice Alford's Point of View

“Oh, so you’re an expert on pharmaceuticals, Alice?” Arakawa asked me with great interest.

I might have become a specialist, but I’d never really accomplished anything. On the other hand, Arakawa’s mom and Saito had done so many amazing things. In particular, Saito had been featured in an electrical engineering magazine the month before. I mentioned that.

“Seriously? You got into that kind of magazine, Saito?” Arakawa asked. “You should have told me.”

“W-well, the magazine had your mom on the cover, Arakawa. I just had a small part at the end, and I was more embarrassed than proud.”

The two of them were really getting into the discussion. It was the ideal friendship right there before my eyes.

Must be nice. I wish I had something like that.

“That reminds me, Arakawa,” I said. “Your mom has done some pharmaceutical work, too, right? I guess she does some of her research at home?”

He readily told me all about it. She did research even in her own room at home, and would sometimes forget to prepare dinner. Sometimes she would suddenly inject drug products into her own body, and would say it was okay because it was safe. She often went to him for advice...

“Wait!” I burst out. “What did you just say?”

“I said, she uses her own body—”

“No, not that! The part after that!”

“The part about me giving her advice?” he asked.

How would he be able to give advice to that kind of genius? Maybe Arakawa is a pharmaceutical specialist too...

I asked him.

“No, I’m definitely no specialist in pharmaceuticals,” he replied.

I guess she just likes to ask him because he’s family, I concluded, but then Saito spoke as if he didn’t believe what he was hearing.

“You developed a new model of powered suit while claiming you’re not a specialist.”

“Look, I’ve told you!” Arakawa started insisting, but I didn’t hear a word. I’d gotten the impression that what he wanted to say was, *It’s not my specialist field, but my abilities surpass those of the renowned genius, Miki Arakawa.*

Come to think of it, I remembered that when I’d still been in my home country, the adults in the research lab had said, “Miki Arakawa just publishes the research of her son, Kouki Arakawa, in her own name. He’s the real genius. Actually, he’s a demon child.”

Back then, I’d thought there was no way a child who wasn’t any older than me could be capable of such things, but from Arakawa and Saito’s reactions just now, I could see it was the truth.

I was now filled with awe as I looked at Arakawa.

Observation Squad, Intelligence Officer's Point of View

My job was to analyze the information sent to Kouki Arakawa's personal terminal and to report to my superiors. Although I was obligated to submit any and all information, he'd recently launched a new model of spy satellite just for us, so I'd been kindly eliminating information that boys of around that age tend to search for before making my reports. I had to say, he had some rather refined interests...

Blonde-haired bunny girls in fishnet stockings... It's like he's an old man!

"Let's see, today's email..." I murmured.

There was an email from his friend Shingo Saito.

Looks like animal trivia. I'll send it to my terminal.

There was nothing else of note.

I guess I'll move on to his browsing history. Hm, what's this? He spends a lot of time looking at this "Make Your Own Laxative Lecture Course!" page. Where does he tend to go after looking at this page? "How to Mix in Medicines so They Can't Be Seen: Perfect for Kids Who Hate Medicines;" "Dealing with Your Father;" "The Perfect Crime Manual: How to Bury a Corpse."

"Commander, it's me." I had contacted the commander without a moment's thought.

"Hey! What's up?" He spoke in his usual carefree voice, but he really had no idea of the extreme danger he was in.

"Please block access to all of the websites I'm about to tell you," I said. "With the exception of one, none of them are crimi-

nal, so it's enough to just shut down the servers."

He listened, seeming to be annoyed that I was reading them out to him, but when I said, "Dealing with Your Father," his voice started to sound like the voice he would use to give commands in the field.

The commander's life is probably safe for now... Next, check personal information. This looks like his diary. This is strange. I'm sure this wasn't here last time I looked, but it was updated two days ago. Oh, I see, this has been transferred from another terminal. I'll have to check that one later too. The contents look quite old... I wonder if there's anything about me in here. Aha, what's this?

The entry read, "Today I met a young lady who said she was one of Macho Man's work colleagues. She was saying she really wanted to see the Earth from space. I'll talk to Mom about it."

Oh, young lady... This kid sure isn't blind.

Another entry said, "I spoke with Mom, and it seems she's going to improve the rocket firework. I wonder if the lady will be happy?"

Yes, Kouki, I was happy.

"The launch was successful! When the lady saw the images from the satellite, she said, 'You can see so clearly!' When she smiles like that, that's when she looks her most beautiful."

That's so cute! How was this kid so cute?! I just want to eat him up.

That put me in a good mood, so I secretly gave him a new "school swimsuit" entry below "bunny girls" in the contents of his hidden *Study Materials* folder in his bookmarks.

Kouki Arakawa's Point of View

Today was the day of my first exam at the academy.

The number of hours of courses you had to take would change depending on your exam results. The academy had put together a special curriculum for allowing students to improve in their specialist fields. The subjects in which they scored the highest in the exams at the start of each year would be eliminated from their curriculum.

For example, Saito would probably get out of computer-related and math-related classes because electrical engineering was his specialty field. Alice's specialty was pharmaceuticals, so I expected her to get out of chemistry and languages such as English and German.

As for me... I didn't have a specialty! I wasn't even going to be able to keep up with the lessons at the academy.

Maybe I should just quit with dignity. Actually, no. I finally made a friend, so I should do my best. Alice has been emailing me every day recently... I wouldn't want to quit the academy at this point. Saito is here too...

Given that, I'd begun to study in earnest. Even on weekends, I'd gone as far as finding all my old textbooks to study from! Then came the first day of the tests.

“...”

I can't even read the test problems!!

Why are even the problems written in English? When you ask me math problems using that sort of English, I don't even know what I'm supposed to do!! These morons, I don't see what's so

great about being bilingual... This might be the international standard language, but why use it for... Oh right, this is the “International Science and Technology Academy.” Having English as their standard makes sense. In that case, how come they usually don’t use English? They should be using English to explain things in lessons. Actually, I’d be in trouble if they did... I thought to myself while staring at the test in front of me.

“N— Na— Does this say ‘name’?” I muttered.

I’d found the part where you probably had to write your name, but I wasn’t sure if I was right about that. I’d normally understand these things. For example, I was capable of putting a few basic words together and reading them. But this was like suddenly being thrown into a page in some foreign language after following a link to a slightly naughty adult website! It’s hard to figure out what to do when that happens, right? It was like that! The situation was just like that. The only difference was that I couldn’t just panic and press the browser’s back button this time, so I was completely bewildered.

I’ll just hand in a blank paper...

I’d made my decision.

I slurped down ramen noodles at the school cafeteria at lunch. Alice was in front of me eating pasta, and I could practically hear her making “Nom nom!” sounds as she ate. It was soothing.

Saito was beside me, devouring pork cutlets on rice like some kind of starved beast. *You’re in the presence of a lady; eat with some dignity!*

I looked back to Alice, and she asked me, “What’s wrong? Looks like there’s something on your mind.”

There was no way I was going to give her the honest answer, so I just had to change the topic. It was all right for Alice; she could speak English no problem. For me, it was totally impossible! As I looked at Alice through tearful eyes, I started to wonder, *Can Saito speak English?* I tried asking him.

“How dumb do you think I am?!” he asked. “If I couldn’t speak English, I wouldn’t have even been able to get into the academy.”

Saito and Alice looked at me as if to say, *What are you even talking about?*

Sorry, but I can’t even do something that basic... I faced the afternoon exam still in low spirits.

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Class Teacher, Roberta's Point of View

It's happening again... I thought to myself as the test began.

Once again, Arakawa was sitting in front of a blank test paper with his arms folded and a troubled look on his face. This test was just to test understanding of the fundamentals; the difficulty level wasn't high. Despite that, he had left his answer paper blank without even filling in his name.

I thought maybe he was feeling unwell, but when I went over to him, Arakawa slowly opened his eyes.

He glared at me with a fierce scowl.

Whaa?! I thought, stunned.

His eyes seemed to say, *Stay the hell away from me!*

I spent the rest of the test too afraid to look at Arakawa. As soon as the test finished, I reported what I'd seen to the principal, who then hastily made a phone call to someone. She turned to face me and said, "I'll speak with Arakawa, so please leave this matter in my hands."

I thought I was supposed to be his homeroom teacher... It seems I'm losing confidence in myself with each passing day.

Kouki Arakawa's Point of View

During the afternoon test, I tried to think of some excuse I could make, but nothing came to mind. Then Ms. Roberta came to see how I was doing.

I think it was because I hadn't been writing any answers and had stayed silent, but the moment she saw my face, her eyes teared up as if something was troubling her, and she returned to her desk. It made sense. A student who sits with his arms folded and doesn't write any answers during a test is difficult to handle.

I should just quit the academy, I thought gloomily. *This was never the right school for me. Then again, I was admitted with high expectations, and I don't want to let Mom down.*

I was thinking things over while wandering aimlessly through the academy, when suddenly I found I'd arrived at the teaching staff building.

I'm going home... I'll go home and talk things through with Mom, I thought to myself.

I was about to leave when there came an announcement, "1-S, Kouki Arakawa. Report to the principal's office immediately."

I guess this is the end. Feeling defeated, I knocked on the door of the principal's office, which was right in front of me.

When I entered the room, the principal appeared somewhat shocked, but she soon told me, "Please, take a seat."

As I sat facing the principal, I pondered over how to approach the topic; but in the end, I gave up trying to sugarcoat things, and expressed my feelings honestly.

“I think I should quit the academy. I’m just not well suited to this place.”

The principal’s face became noticeably contorted.

That’s right, I thought miserably. I might be the son of a world-renowned genius, but I’m clearly lacking in talent or skill, and should never have entered this academy. I haven’t yet damaged the academy’s reputation, but I’ve insulted them by being here. I know it won’t be fixed by an apology, but the least I can do is bow my head in remorse and walk away.

The principal opened her mouth to speak. “I’m so sorry, Arakawa! It’s all because I didn’t explain things properly to the relevant people in the advanced education division!”

The principal suddenly bowed her head, and I was so shocked I couldn’t move as she continued to explain.

“There was really no need for you to take the tests in the first place. There has been some sort of mistake because you should have been informed. If you wish, I can soon have the responsible people dismissed, and we can act like this never happened.”

Is she saying there’s no need for me to take the tests? And what’s this about dismissals?

“Actually, it’s misleading of me to say that they’re not necessary,” she went on. “You’re here on a scholarship, and I have no problem with you taking whichever classes you like. However, I must insist that you take the ethics class. This is all the academy asks of you.”

Now I see. The reason I was placed at this academy is because I’m being treated as a scholarship student whose grades are irrelevant! That makes sense. Even my mom couldn’t get me admitted to the International Science and Technology Academy

with words alone. If I'd stopped to think about it calmly, I would have realized. Why hadn't I thought of such a simple explanation?

I suspected the ethics class was something everyone had to attend so they could be part of those “let's all stop doing bad things” campaigns.

Ah, what a relief. Now I don't have to worry about making Mom worried, and I can see Alice every day. And Saito too... I guess. There's no need to dismiss the people responsible or anything like that. Everyone makes mistakes, they just need to be more careful from now on.

I told the principal so and said, “Thank you,” while showing her my best smile.

Principal, Kaori Yamamoto's Point of View

When I heard about the tests from Roberta, Arakawa's home-room teacher, I almost fainted.

Kouki Arakawa had been forced to take academy exams! Even though I'd made it very clear that that was unnecessary, it seemed the information hadn't been properly communicated...

According to Roberta, he had been sitting, arms folded, in a foul mood with his answer sheet left blank. She told me she'd been somewhat frightened after being glared at, and hadn't been able to do anything.

After complaining to the people responsible via a private phone line, I had Roberta stand down, and contacted someone using a secret private line that had been prepared especially for the academy after Arakawa's admission.

"This is Yamamoto. We have an emergency situation. Have you made preparations?"

The person on the other end of the phone was an operator from the Self-Defense Forces General Staff Headquarters.

"The third division is currently ready to respond, and can sortie immediately. The order is issued immediately whenever this line is used. The front line squad will arrive within eight minutes."

Approximately 200 fully armed soldiers... It wasn't a high enough number for me to completely relax, but I had to have faith that things would turn out okay.

"I'll leave it to you. Thank you for your assistance." I hung up the phone.

Next, I needed a way to appease Arakawa.

“1-S, Kouki Arakawa,” an announcement came over the inter-com. “Report to the principal’s office immediately.”

That was way too soon! I didn’t tell them to call him here yet. I haven’t prepared myself!

While I was getting myself into a panic, I heard a knock at the door.

How could Arakawa have gotten here so fast?! Calmly. Deal with it calmly. It’s not like he’ll just randomly press some sort of launch button.

It was vital to solve this by talking it through.

“Please, take a seat,” I said, and he quietly sat down.

Now what? Without me having to say anything, he began talking.

“I think I should quit the academy. I’m just not well suited to this place.”

His expression was so cold, as if he was ready to shoot me dead. He was no doubt thinking, *I don’t need to be in a low-level place like this.*

But he was wrong.

Arakawa was abnormal: Since childhood, he had made numerous new discoveries and technological developments. Our tests were only ever meant for normal people. I wanted to scream this at him, but if I did that, it would no doubt be the end of me. Perhaps the academy itself would be blown to pieces.

As I had that thought, I was unable to stop my face from contorting in despair. That was when information began to flow across the contact lens display that I was wearing in my eye. “Front line squad has arrived. Student evacuation... complete. Students have been informed that this is a drill.”

Okay, now we can get to the serious negotiations! With that thought, I began to speak to Arakawa.

“I’m so sorry, Arakawa! It’s all because I didn’t explain things properly to the relevant people in the advanced education division.”

He seemed willing to listen to me. I continued, telling him there was no need to take tests.

Telling him the responsible people would be dismissed.

Telling him that I wanted to pretend this whole thing never happened.

After he had given it some thought, he seemed to accept and understand everything. Finally, he said it wasn’t necessary to dismiss the people responsible.

On this point, I was truly grateful to him. Those responsible were veterans who had worked at the academy for many years. I would have been sad to lose them. I was able to give him my sincere thanks from the heart.

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Kouki Arakawa's Point of View

As I left the director's office, a surprise evacuation drill was underway.

I guess Alice and Saito must have gone home for the day already.

I decided I'd go home, too, and I climbed aboard the car that came to meet me as usual.

The usual bald guy was there. "Welcome back, Kouki!"

I wanted to get back out of the car, but I already had a duo of bald guys sitting beside me at either side.

The bald guys are multiplying! But how? They must be self-replicating.

I'd let my guard down because recently it had always been women. What's more, when I'd looked at my favorite folder on my personal terminal the day before, strange data had appeared there from out of nowhere. It was like something from a horror movie!

Somehow, I felt as though I'd seen that woman in the swimsuit before, too.

But I wasn't ready to face reality as I returned home trembling, once again.

Chapter 4: Workplace Field Trip

Shuuichi Arakawa's Point of View

Ba-ban! Ba-ba-ban! Pah pah pah pah...

I listened to the dwindling sound of gunshots from within the command vehicle, which was lit by a dim red glow. All of the facilities would soon be under our control. Deciding to take a smoke, I took a cigarette from the pocket of my uniform and lit it.

I breathed out. “Fuuh...”

I gazed at the rising smoke and remembered the reason I’d come here today.

The initial trigger had been the Arakawa Pact, which had come into effect in January of this year. The pact stated that countries of the world would not interfere with Kouki Arakawa, and would allow him to live freely. This had created time for us to form a plot to claim him for our own country.

It was true that there had been good intentions behind the pact. Miki had been delighted, but the pact gave me no delight. The result had been what I’d expected: Rebel groups opposing the pact had appeared in numerous locations and were directing their forces against Kouki.

“I won’t let them lay a finger on him,” I told myself while chewing on the cigarette filter.

The group we were currently suppressing was the largest of the rebel groups. It seemed the group was funded by a cult orga-

nization that considered Kouki a demon child. Devotees of this organization appeared to include people in high-ranking political positions who had leaked out information about Kouki.

If we can just crush this one group, we'll be safe for a while. I might even be able to spend more time at home, I thought as one of my subordinates entered the command vehicle. It was Elise, an information officer.

“My report follows,” she said: “Squad A controls the entirety of the compound. Squads C and D are beginning to clear out the remnants of the enemy forces.”

Hm... Things are moving as smoothly as expected. But what of Squad B?

“Elise, what about Squad B?” I asked her, and she began operating the information terminal strapped to her arm. Then she looked at me and spoke with weariness in her voice.

“My name is Clare. Elise is my older twin sister.”

An awkward atmosphere filled the command vehicle, and I was at loss for words.

So this one is Clare. I'll have to remember that Clare is the one who Kouki is fond of, and Elise is the other one.

“In that case, Clare, what's the current status of Squad B?” I said at last.

“Squad B are currently investigating the underground passageways discovered under the compound. They're advancing forward while disarming traps that were set up.”

The commander of Squad B was Louis. I knew Louis could be relied upon, but I had a bad feeling.

Should we send in the reserves?

“Have a member from Squad F and some members from Squad C who are defending the command vehicle follow after Squad B,” I said.

“I’ll give the order immediately.”

For now, we just had to wait and see... but I couldn’t get rid of a nagging sense of uneasiness. After I had smoked another four cigarettes, there came a transmission from Squad B.

“This is Squad B! We’ve encountered numerous enemies in the underground passageways. We are engaging. We have sustained heavy damage. Request backup! Please send backup!”

Damn! That bad feeling was right on target... What now? Should I have them withdraw, or should I send more reinforcements? This was no time for indecision, so I chose both.

“Have Squad B withdraw immediately. Then instruct all squads to retain a minimum number of personnel and to send the rest to aid Squad B.”

Beside me, Clare was gathering information with a cool expression on her face.

I’ve got to keep myself together... I thought. The commanding officer can’t go out in the field. Even if my subordinates are in crisis, all I can do in this situation is chew my fingernails and watch.

I somehow suppressed the urge to give in to my emotions and punch the display screen. All I could do was wait. I folded my arms and prayed that the situation would improve in some way. That was when we received a transmission.

“This is Squad A. We have retrieved the withdrawing Squad B. After joining with reinforcements and regrouping, we’ll move to suppress the enemy once more.”

All right, we’ve avoided unnecessary losses. Now we just need to eradicate the remaining enemies. But why are they putting up such a fight here? We held the upper hand in this situation. The only option for our opponent was to surrender. What have I overlooked?

Just then, there came a transmission that answered my question.

“This is Squad A! We have discovered a missile silo deep within the passageways. Launch procedures have been initiated!”

A missile?! So that’s their secret! That’s why they were resisting. I’ve no idea where they intend to strike, but we have to prevent it at all cost!

“Prevent the launch with all you have!” I yelled. “If possible, capture the control room and gather information!”

Then I returned to my seat and squeezed my eyes shut. *Let things turn out okay, I’m begging you...*

I didn’t normally believe in God, but at that moment I was praying.

“We’ve successfully captured the control room,” Clare reported in a businesslike manner. “The information is being sent to my terminal. We are currently determining their target.”

All that remains is to take control of the missile itself, I thought with relief. I think we’re going to be okay. I felt more relaxed as I waited for the next report.

“Launch prevention failed! I repeat: Launch prevention failed! The missile’s boosters are firing.”

“Data analysis complete. This is a ballistic missile. The target is the Next-Generation Scientific Research Institute, Japan.”

The worst possible reports arrived simultaneously.

The Next-Generation Scientific Research Institute? Miki and Kouki should be heading there today. In a panic, I left the command vehicle.

Before my eyes, the form of a missile was tearing through the sky...

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Kouki Arakawa's Point of View

“Okay, is everybody ready? Once we’re inside, make sure you listen to the people in charge.”

There were cries of, “Yes, Mrs. Arakawa,” and “Buh hee!” in response to Mom’s voice.

It was the weekend, and I had arrived with my mom at the Next-Generation Scientific Research Institute.

It had all started with Saito saying, “Hey, Arakawa, I’d love to see a powered suit that’s still in development.” I’d been so distracted by the exams that I’d agreed without much thought. This had turned into quite a problem.

In the end, like always, I’d asked Mom if she could do anything to help me out, and to my surprise, she had happily agreed. Mom had said, “You promised your friend, right? Well, then, that’s that.”

Can she really just say, “That’s that,” and consider it settled? I thought uneasily. Though I am grateful, and I suppose I shouldn’t complain...

Saito had been happy and clearly excited when I’d told him I’d gotten permission. Although I hadn’t planned to do so from the start, I’d invited Alice, too, and she’d wanted to come with us, so it had turned into a field trip to a workplace.

“Please leave your personal terminals here,” the security staff requested with a smile.

Ah, I guess protecting their secrets is an issue.

I’d already figured this out by myself when, as I expected, a

member of security staff said, “We’re asking this of all of you in the interests of security.”

There was no reason to refuse, so I simply went along with it. Mom was apparently being treated as an employee, because she didn’t remove hers.

“So you must be Kouki?” a member of security staff said to me as I handed over my terminal.

“That’s me,” I replied, and he replied by showering me with praise. Clearly, Mom was proud to have me as her son and had been telling it all to various people. I was self-consciously listening to all this when a man in a white coat emerged from the building.

“Welcome, everyone,” he announced. “My name is Ozaki, and I’ll be your guide today.”

Ozaki seemed like a nice person. We all told him, “Thanks for taking care of us today” as we entered the research building.

Once inside, the first thing I saw was their cutting-edge equipment.

No wonder they call it the Next-Generation Scientific Research Institute.

It wasn’t just Saito; even Alice was all fired up. As we were being shown this department, someone who looked very much like a researcher emerged from inside.

“This is no place for children,” the researcher scolded. “What are they doing here?”

Oh, wow! He’s speaking Russian! This was a great chance to show off for Alice.

I responded, trying my hardest not to speak with an accent, “Please excuse us. We’re students from a technology academy here on a field trip. My mother, Arakawa, works here, so we’ve been given permission.”

That seemed to surprise him a little, and he gave me a probing look as he spoke, “So that makes you Kouki? I’m surprised you can understand Russian. My name is Nikolai. Nice to meet you.”

All right! We actually understood each other. I glanced sideways at Alice, and she was looking at me with admiration. Saito was... busy looking at a production line. *Hey! How about you show a little interest in me?!*

Nikolai’s defensiveness disappeared, and he invited us to his own lab. It seemed he was researching new drugs for an incurable disease. Alice enthusiastically asked him questions while Ozaki interpreted.

Saito, what’s got you so interested? I was curious so I went over and asked him. *Ah, so these are powered suit components.* Mom had brought these kinds of things home with her on occasion.

I was looking at the powered suit parts and reminiscing when Nikolai said, “So, Kouki can speak the language of my home country. I had thought Mrs. Arakawa was simply proud because he was family, but I’m in awe to learn that he is also proficient in his language studies.”

Not really; I learned it in my previous life, I thought. Obviously, I couldn’t say that to him, so I just smiled awkwardly.

I looked over to my mom and saw that she’d been called over by other researchers. It seemed they wanted to confirm some research results with her.

Mom turned to us and said, “I’m going to step out for a moment. Please follow Ozaki and Nikolai’s instructions.” She then headed to another area.

We went on to see other departments. There was an artificial organs lab, an aircraft development lab, and even an interesting department that was developing new metals. We had limited access to the arms development department, but they showed us some new weapons, and an employee who saw how eager Saito was had invited him to try on a prototype powered suit. He was running around the testing area, full of energy.

“Buh hee... Buh hee hee hee hee hee!”

Saito was firing on all cylinders, and to say it was nauseating was an understatement. Unlike Alice, he was repulsing all of the employees in the area.

Just when I started wondering what to do, he suddenly stopped moving. It seemed the batteries had run out. The researcher looked a little tired as he went to retrieve Saito, but he managed to muster a slight smile.

We decided to eat lunch before going to see the next department, and everyone headed to the cafeteria.

“So what do you think of our research labs?” Ozaki asked while we ate lunch.

“It’s really interesting,” Alice told him. “I really liked the pharmaceutical research department in particular. I’d love to work in a place like this myself in the future.”

Hearing that put Nikolai in a good mood; he smiled and told her he’d welcome the opportunity to work alongside such a beautiful girl.

“I was interested in the arms department! This is the first time I’ve even worn a military-use suit, and it was really inspiring,” Saito said cheerfully while eating his bowl of pork on rice.

Come to think of it, it was the first time I’d ever seen Saito have so much fun.

I’m really glad we came here today.

“What about you, Kouki?” Ozaki asked. “What did you find interesting?”

“For me, it was the new metals research department. I was really interested in the new metals, especially the development of metals with a high Mohs hardness.”

Ozaki had asked the question, and so I’d answered it, but now everyone was looking at me strangely.

I knew what they were thinking without them saying it: *How weird... I don’t know how to say it, but that’s a strange choice of department.*

It really was amazing, though! A department that made metals that didn’t exist on Earth. I didn’t see what was so wrong with that. Clearly, these guys just didn’t get it.

Huh? A bunch of people sitting on either side of the room were looking at me with sparkling eyes. Oh! Those are the people we met at the metal research department. Worry not! I appreciate the importance of your research. Keep doing your best.

“Well then, let’s get moving,” said Ozaki after seeing that we’d all finished eating, and he resumed giving us the tour.

“This department researches the global environment,” another employee told us, taking over for Ozaki.

I see... Unmanned drones measure pollution in the atmosphere and bore into the South Pole to research the global atmosphere of ancient times. This is nice. What about the evolution of living organisms? Are they trying to solve those mysteries? Just as I was about to ask, the door flew open and someone entered the room.

“We have an emergency situation” were the first words out of Baldy’s mouth.

What’s he doing here? I wondered, but what he said next answered all of my questions.

“A ballistic missile has been launched from a country in Eastern Europe. Its target is here, the Next-Generation Scientific Research Institute.”

Wait. What? Why would a missile strike here?

Alice and everyone else turned pale. I felt close to panic as I asked Baldy, “What should we do?”

“Unfortunately, we failed to intercept it in orbit,” he told me. “Even if we evacuate now, we can’t hope to get beyond the blast radius. Our only option is to wait it out in a secure underground area.”

The outlook he gave us was bleak. Even if we went underground, the entire research facility would be blown away.

Now what? Seriously, now what? I thought frantically. *All right, I’ll stay calm and talk it through with Mom this time. She’s a genius, so she’s bound to think of something!* I tried to call to Mom for help but then I realized, *I don’t have my terminal with me!!*

I had forgotten that they’d been taken when we entered.

This is bad. We're totally screwed.

Just when I thought there was nothing we could do, a large-scale terminal in the corner of the room caught my eye.

I'll use that to contact Mom, I thought as I ran over to the terminal.

Luckily, it had been left powered on. Some numerical values were displayed on the screen, but this was an emergency situation. Even if I ended up deleting research data, no one could complain.

First, I tried operating it to get to the communications screen. However, no matter what I did, I couldn't get back to the desktop screen!

What if I press Ctrl F? Looks like this is no ordinary terminal.

I became more and more impatient as the display filled with lists of numbers that I didn't understand. Then, suddenly, *Error* appeared on the screen, and it stopped.

We're finished... I thought. *Are we going to die here?*

Then I heard a few words leaking from the intercom that Baldy was holding to his ear. "Destruction of the ballistic missile confirmed..."

Whaat?! What happened?

Everyone was cheering around me, and Alice was hugging me for some reason.

Her boobs are so soft... Wait, this is no time for that. What in the world is going on here?

“Incredible. I never thought it would be possible to do so much in such a short time,” said Nikolai admiringly. Saito and Ozaki were repeatedly praising me, too.

“Arakawa, I always knew you were a genius... You’re amazing,” Saito told me.

“I can see why Arakawa has such pride in you. I take my hat off to your superior intellect,” added Ozaki.

Has there been some kind of misunderstanding? I was just messing around with the terminal and trying to contact Mom. Huh? I’m not being humble, I’m serious. Look, someone just tell me what’s going on!! Why am I always getting into these misunderstandings?

**

Ozaki's Point of View

As soon as we realized that a direct hit by a ballistic missile was unavoidable, Kouki ran over to an unmanned control terminal in the corner of the room.

What does he hope to do with that? I wondered.

Knowing that it was hopeless, I went to grab Kouki so we could evacuate underground, but the bald-headed security person stopped me.

“It looks like he has an idea,” he said, insisting that we should just watch.

As Kouki stood there with a serious look on his face, I looked at the large-scale screen on the wall connected to the terminal, and then I realized what it was he was trying to do.

“He’s changing the course of the unmanned drone?” I said aloud. I couldn’t see what good that would do. *Does he intend to make that unmanned measurement drone that’s not even five meters wide collide with a missile that’s falling from the outer atmosphere? Impossible... It can’t be done.*

Then again, the boy before me was the son of Miki Arakawa.

Perhaps he had heard the words: “Missile launched from a country in Eastern Europe,” and had been able to predict and calculate an accurate speed and trajectory of the missile’s descent. But in reality, without high-grade missile defense technology, such a thing was completely impossible. The possibility of him accomplishing such a thing using nothing but his intellect was close to zero.

I felt ready to pray as I followed the point of light representing

the unmanned drone on the screen. Then suddenly, the lights disappeared.

“Destruction of the ballistic missile confirmed...”

Even when I heard those words, I still couldn’t comprehend it.

You’re kidding me. He made that near-zero possibility a reality? He caused an unmanned drone to collide with a missile falling twenty times the speed of sound. He accomplished something that humankind has only just been capable of with the help of technology.

I wouldn’t have considered the word *genius* adequate. He said it was a coincidence; humility appeared to be one of his virtues.

Kouki Arakawa, a boy whose accomplishments were recognized even by Miki Arakawa. I wondered what great things he’d go on to accomplish. I was enthralled by the thought.

**

Shuuichi Arakawa's Point of View

"It seems your son had to resort to crashing an unmanned drone into it," Clare reported.

Her report was a relief. But on the other hand, I'd long thought that Kouki's way of doing things was a little too flashy.

How do you even intercept a ballistic missile using an unmanned drone? I wondered. *Damn! I can't believe I left it to my son rather than cleaning up my own damn mess.* But I still had work to do.

"Have we taken full control?" I asked.

"Yes. We're currently preparing to transfer the prisoners."

I'll make them regret messing with my son... I promise I'll find their leader and chase him to the depths of hell if I have to. I'm coming for you.

"I'll help, too," Clare mumbled absentmindedly. "I'm also a member of the Arakawa Family," she added with a smile.

"No matter what you say, I won't let you take my son as your groom," I replied.

As Clare's face was turning bright red, I left the command vehicle and stepped outside. I gazed at the clear sky, and heard Clare cocking her weapon behind me...

Chapter 5: Everyone's Research

Kouki Arakawa's Point of View

Sometime after the ballistic missile had been blown to pieces, the three of us were eating in the school cafeteria as normal when Alice quietly said, "I wonder what I should do for my research topic..."

"I've decided mine," Saito overly enthusiastically replied while greedily devouring his bowl of chicken and egg on rice.

Now that they mention it, the teacher did say something about that the other day, I mused. Elite high school students carry out their own personal research and release periodic reports, or something like that. Not that it has anything to do with me...

I wanted to try researching new metals like I'd seen in the research lab, but I didn't have the funding or the equipment for that. Also, when I'd talked to the principal about my doing research, she had forcefully told me, "There's no need!"

I was curious about Alice's research. "Pharmaceuticals is your specialty, right? So, do something with that," I suggested.

For some reason, she started staring right at me. It felt a little strange when she looked at me like that. I didn't know what to do, so I avoided making eye contact.

"Will you help me out?" she asked.

Her eyes looked like the eyes of a small animal as she looked at

me, so there was no way I could refuse!

No problem. I'll help, and Saito should do his best to help too.

When I said this to Alice, she looked pleased, and put the contents of her own research on a printout. For some reason, Saito was trembling and saying, “But what about my research time,” with tears in his eyes, but I was sure he was happy to be able to help Alice. In reality, he’d happily enjoy the attention when she thanked him.

We decided we’d go to Alice’s research lab after school to discuss what we were going to do.

**

“Well, I think we should try making small improvements to something like an antibiotic,” suggested Alice.

Hm, improving something that already exists... I felt like we’d be able to do that a little too easily. Actually, how do you determine the effectiveness? Even if I conveniently catch a cold, I’m not like Mom: I’m not going to start recklessly injecting new drugs into my own body. If we ask Saito nicely, he’ll probably agree to be a guinea pig... but test it on myself? Not a chance!

“What should we do about a guinea pig? I guess Saito is one possibility?” I asked them.

“Buh hee?! Why should it be me?! I mean, if it’s for Alice, I could give it a shot, but...”

Alice simply said, “Ah...” and froze in place.

I know you’re trying to score points, Saito. But you shouldn’t be using your own body like that.

“Wouldn’t your mom have a sample in her lab that we could use, Arakawa?” Alice asked.

Hmm. My mom... I thought. If I ask, she’ll probably do something to help. It’s not like we can actually test it on Saito; I wouldn’t want to lose a friend.

I replied, “I’m okay with that,” and Alice looked delighted.

It really does make me happy to see a cute girl look so pleased, I reflected.

However, what was awaiting us was a nightmare.

I had no problem with carrying out new research in Alice’s lab every day after school, but there was one thing I hadn’t anticipated.

“Saito, remind me what we’re supposed to do next?” she demanded.

“I think we’re supposed to measure the concentration using that paper. Buh hee?! I’ve just burnt this! What am I going to do?”

Alice was merciless toward her assistants, and was a real slave driver besides. I wanted to complain about it, but I’d hardly be able to speak my mind if I saw those eyes tear up and heard her say, “Sorry.” So once again, today we were acting as her hands and frantically doing as we were told.

To tell the truth, Alice was trying her hardest, too, so we quietly got on with the work in an attempt to make a good impression.

“Arakawa...” Saito came toward me with a worried look on his face.

I had a terrible feeling about it, but I asked him what was wrong.

“I got the amount wrong and added twice as much.”

Now what...? I wondered. If we start again, we'll have to go through the whole complicated procedure again from the start. I'm sure things will work out somehow if it's only twice as much.

“Saito, nothing happened,” I said with a serious expression on my face. “You understand? You’re just a little tired.”

Saito repeated what I’d said as if trying to convince himself as he returned to his work.

All right, I'll start the separation process, I decided. Now we've gotten this far, there's just a little more to do before today's work is over...

“Arakawa! Arakawa!!”

I thought I heard someone calling my name when suddenly, I opened my eyes.

I must have dozed off for a while... When I looked at my watch, I realized that over 20 minutes had passed. This is bad. This is really bad.

I hastily peered inside the motionless separating device, and was at a loss for words. I wasn’t quite sure what the substance lying inside the device was. Just as I was despairing over my wasted efforts, there was someone tapping me on the shoulder.

I turned to see Saito, who told me with a serious expression, “Nothing happened. You understand? Nothing happened,” as if it were some kind of incantation.

He's right... Nothing happened. I continued to work while repeating the words to myself. After that, there were another three incidents where *nothing happened*, but we finally managed to finish the work Alice had given us.

The two of us collapsed exhausted on the floor just as Alice returned to the room from another lab.

“Sorry! There’s equipment I can’t use here, so I had to mix this drug product elsewhere. So anyway, did you finish the thing I asked for?”

We handed over our drug product, which was now a different substance from what we had been originally tasked with. Alice held it like it was something precious, gleefully telling us, “Thank you so much. Now I can finally make a test product!”

Unlike Alice, who was in high spirits, we were looking at the preparation while unable to hide our guilt.

“Saito, do you think that thing will work?” I hedged.

“I highly doubt it.”

Even so, there was no way we could tell her now, so we made it a promise between gentleman to keep that secret.

After finishing the drug product, Alice happily told me, “Give this to your mom and tell her to try it on a sample, it doesn’t matter which one.”

I felt an unbelievable level of exhaustion as I returned home with the ampoule she’d given me.



Miki Arakawa's Point of View

I had arrived in my virus research lab carrying the ampoule that Kouki had handed to me the night before. He'd explained to me that it was an anti-viral medicine that he'd made together with his friends at the academy. He'd told me to test it on a sample, but I didn't know what sort of sample to use.

"My son was involved, so I probably shouldn't use an ordinary sample," I reflected.

I decided to start with a sample that had a safety level of class 3. However, it had no effect. I thought for a while, and then tried it on a class 4 sample.

"It doesn't work on smallpox or the Ebola virus..."

Exactly what type of sample would it have an effect on? I wanted to try it on all class 1 samples, but unfortunately, there wasn't enough in the ampoule. Could it be a failure? Failure was possible considering the level of equipment available at the academy, but all of Kouki's friends that I'd met were exceptional.

Then I was filled with excitement as an idea formed in my mind. If my idea happened to be correct, the textbooks would have to be rewritten.

I moved forward to test my new theory...

"Arakawa, it's not safe! That's not something that humankind can handle!"

A researcher working at the research lab tried to stop me, but I had no intention of listening. I entered a special isolation chamber that was protected by a special two-meter-thick door on the eighth level of the basement. The chamber was capable of incin-

erating anyone inside if necessary. Then I carefully removed the sample and used the contents of the ampoule.

“Incredible... It really is effective.”

I couldn't believe what was happening before my eyes. I used up all of the small amount of remaining contents to confirm the result countless times: it was always the same.

I have to contact the World Health Organization immediately! I also contacted the academy and asked them to provide me with the research records.

The sample that I'd found the ampoule to be effective against was the only sample on Earth to be designated level 5: the virus that had caused the European tragedy.

**

Alice Alford's Point of View

Something incredible happened! The drug product we'd made turned out to be effective against the European tragedy. As a result, my research lab at the academy had been sealed off since yesterday. But something good had come out of it.

I had a lot of respect for my dad, and he was the one who'd inspired me to take up pharmaceutical research. He was normally a quiet and exacting man, but now he was full of praise for me.

He held me and told me, "Well done. I'm proud you're my daughter."

My father's grandfather had died in the European tragedy. My father once told me that that was why he'd become a researcher, and so I was worried that maybe I'd taken my father's research from him.

When I asked him, he told me, "What are you saying? You've succeeded in doing what I couldn't; be proud of yourself," and stroked my hair.

I was so, so happy, and I ended up crying against my father's chest. I thanked Kouki and Saito, but they both said, "Honestly, we didn't do anything!" and tried to give all of the credit to me.

"I can't let you do that!" I told them; but for some reason, they just smiled awkwardly and wouldn't look me in the eye. In the end, I was only able to get them to include their names as research colleagues.

Will there ever come a day I can repay them? I wondered.

That was when I decided that when the time came, I'd be there for them no matter what.

2102: The WHO Officially Announced a Cure for the European Tragedy.

The three discoverers were Alice Alford, Shingo Saito, and Kouki Arakawa, all of whom were enrolled at the International Science and Technology Academy.

**

“Hey, help me with my research too.”

Saito started it all with just a few words. Thus began the story of a week-long nightmare.

Kouki Arakawa's Point of View

“Hey, help me with my research, too,” Saito said to Alice and me while greedily devouring his bowl of tempura on rice.

To be honest, it sounded like a chore, but I couldn't refuse to help Saito after I'd helped Alice. Alice seemed quite enthusiastic, probably because Saito had helped her, and she told him, “I don't mind.” So, I asked Saito what he wanted help with.

“Well, I'd like to make a simple work robot with on-board AI.”

Hm, a work robot...

Since this was Saito, I figured it would be used with military-use powered suits.

I asked him, “What sort of shape will it be? A humanoid? A battle tank?”

“No, a cockroach.”

Wait, what did he just say? I feel like I just heard a word I don't like to hear, but I must have misheard.

Alice also stopped drinking her tea and made a face.

“What did you say?” I asked hesitantly.

“I said a cockroach.”

I didn't like the way he said it with a smile.

Why does it have to be a cockroach?! If it had been a tank or some unsolvable problem, I could have said, “Hey, Mom! Take care of it,” like always. Why does it have to be today of all days

that he takes a liking to such a disgustingly realistic creature? See what you've done! Alice is already starting to cry a little.

“Well, it's a work robot, so I think this is logical...” he went on.

I don't care about your logic! Why do we have to model it on such a disgusting creature? It's bothering Alice, so make it something else!

When I told him so, despite normally being quiet, Saito exploded. “Buh hee?! Disgusting? How can you call them disgusting?! Cockroaches are amazing creatures. They have a perfect form that hasn't changed over the last three billion years. They're so adaptable that they can cope with any environment. They're also top-class amongst insects in terms of their quick-wittedness. There are types that don't just glide, but can actually fly. They can live without absorbing moisture for longer than 50 days. They're also fast learners, so if you put poison down in the same place, they won't eat from there any more, and they quickly acquire an immunity to the effects of the poison. They're perfect! They're the ultimate life form. What's more...”

My eyes began to glaze over, and I glanced sideways away from Saito's passionate speech as Alice tugged on my sleeve.

“What's wrong with Saito?” she asked.

No use asking me. I've no idea.

On first impression, I'd thought he was a weird person, but I'd been starting to think that'd been a misunderstanding. However, from the way he was acting here, it was clear that he was just a weird person, after all.

“Maybe Saito feels insulted in some way because we've disrespected cockroaches?” I suggested to Alice.

She nodded in agreement.

“Hey, are you two listening?” Saito demanded. “I’m just getting to the good part.”

He had already been talking five minutes about the wonders and ecology of cockroaches, but he still wasn’t satisfied...

I wonder if we should give him the nickname “Cockroach.” We get it, Saito. The shape can be a cockroach, but there’s no way Alice and I are going out to catch a sample.

“Oh, that’s no problem. I have some as pets,” said Saito with a look on his face that suggested that this was somehow normal.

How can he say there’s no problem when Alice is already half crying?!

“After school today, come home with me, and we’ll choose which kind of cockroach we want to model it on,” Saito suggested to us with a smile.

I was scared to tell him that I didn’t want to because the whole thing was disgusting, so all I could do was nod my head.

**

Scuttle scuttle...

The first thing I saw upon entering Saito’s room was the rearing case set against the wall. I also heard sounds that I couldn’t even describe.

Alice hadn’t gotten beyond the doorway, and was peering inside.

“How many are inside there?” I asked hesitantly.

“Right now, there are eight different types and about eighty cockroaches in total,” replied Saito happily. Then he began taking one type at a time out of the case to tell us about them.

The smoky brown cockroach; the Japanese cockroach; the gigantic *Megaloblatta longipennis*... I couldn't even tell them apart, but he seemed to have a name for each one and affection for them all.

I didn't really want to look at them, so I simply said, “Let's go with this one.”

“I thought so too,” he agreed. “The German cockroach is the most popular, so let's go with that.”

I supported his opinion, as if to say, *You really know your stuff, Saito!* And meanwhile, I thought, *Alice, please, don't look at me like you think I'm into cockroaches too. I've got no love for these creatures!*

From the next day onward, we began building the robot in Saito's lab. But on the first day, the German cockroach we brought as a sample—its name was Angel—escaped and flew into Alice's face, so we very nearly lost a precious sample.

After that, we put way too much effort into the appearance, so it didn't look like a cockroach-type work robot as we'd originally intended; it appeared as though we'd given birth to an actual one-meter-long cockroach.

When we actually got it moving for the the first time, it looked so realistic that I felt my knees give way, and Alice ran full-speed out of the lab. It was enough to make Saito want to rub his face against it.

And then we were hit with a real problem.

“So, how should we set up the AI that Arakawa’s mom gave us?” asked Saito.

Saito gave me a puzzled look as he opened the programming window.

Hm, if the robot looks this realistic, we should stick with realism in the inner workings too... I thought.

After I made my suggestion, the three of us each began entering the content into the screen. Finally, Saito added an activity shutdown program, “Slipper #1,” in case anything happened; and with that we were done.

**

Work Robot Chabane's Point of View

I am a robot built by my masters. My priorities, as per my programming, are the following five items:

1. Do not approach my first master, Lady Alice. Furthermore, I must not attack humans.
2. Clean the interior of the academy. I am also to carry out other tasks that I deem useful to humans.
3. Do not self-replicate more than necessary.
4. Do not allow people to see me.
5. Periodically return to the laboratory.

First of all, I decided to take up residence in the sewers below the academy. Then, I focused on producing assistants in order to clean the large academy.

While collecting the necessary parts from dumping grounds and the like, I produced more than 400 assistants, and these all emerged at once from a manhole during the night to begin cleaning the academy.

That was when I realized that I could not clean efficiently in my current state, and made improvements to myself.

I continued to live in such a way for some time. Then, one day during garbage collection, I encountered a human other than my masters! After looking right at me, the human left as if nothing had happened, but surely they had been surprised?

Before long, there was no cleaning left to be done in the acad-

emy.

I know! I'll try making a flowerbed like my master Sir Kouki has described! I thought. It seems that humans are all soothed by the sight of flowers...

After making my decision, I diligently began collecting parts in order to create further assistants that would help make the flowerbed.

**

Academy Principal Kaori Yamamoto's Point of View

“This area has been cleaned too...” I murmured.

I was in a great mood because every inch of the academy interior had been cleaned. I'd always annoyed the students with my lectures on the importance of cleaning, but they'd never responded well. But now it seemed they'd finally understood. No matter where I looked within the academy, there wasn't a single speck of dust.

When I went behind the laboratory building—a place where people often threw litter—I saw something there that stopped my thoughts. In front of me, there was a cockroach walking on two legs with a garbage bag hanging from its neck.

A one-meter-long cockroach was collecting garbage in a garbage bag while walking. Feeling as though it couldn't be real, I simply went back the way I'd came and returned home. I must have imagined that thing because I was so tired. That was the only explanation. I decided I would get a good night of sleep to overcome my daily tiredness.

The next day, when I arrived at the academy, I once again saw something impossible.

There were flowers and plant pots made from recycled garbage inside the academy. They had been carefully positioned so as not to cause offense, and the academy looked like a scene out of a movie.

Did someone call in professionals? I asked around, but I was told no one had.

In the staff room, we finally concluded that it must have been

a student prank, but could the students really have managed to cover the outer wall of the clock tower in the center of the academy? I was pondering over it while gazing out the window, when I saw the bipedal cockroach itself walking along while holding a plant pot.

I must still be tired...

**

36,000 kilometers from the Earth... The thing was floating in outer space. On its cylindrical outer wall, the words “Do not open” were written in something like black marker pen. Close to the thing was a machine shaped like a fish. The machine was flying around the thing as if it was thinking something over, but after some time, it stopped. As if having made a decision, an arm gradually extended from the fish.

Slowly—frustratingly slow—it took hold of the thing, and in that instant... the thing flew off, escaping from the arm as the thing had come to life. The machine was left puzzled, gazing in the direction that the thing had flown off.

The machine’s lens was aimed at the blue Earth.

**

Miki Arakawa's Point of View

I was leading development at the Space Exploration and Associated International Space Station, as requested by the United Nations. The space station was positioned in an asteroid belt beyond the orbit of Mars, and the plan was to use the space station as a base for launching unmanned exploration vessels into outer space. However, there were too many difficulties.

Firstly, there was the problem of remaining on the space station for a long time. Humans in that enclosed space experienced an abnormal amount of stress. In our experiments, the same problem had arisen in the United Nations spacecraft used for military purposes.

“Maybe I’ll ask Kouki,” I murmured to myself; but he was enjoying his youth to the hilt, studying with his friends at the academy. It wouldn’t be right for me to interfere with that.

There was also another problem that was troubling me.

“An asteroid that could possibly enter a collision course with Earth...”

We had calculated the orbit of the asteroid and found there was a 97% chance that the collision would be avoided. As long as there were no external factors to consider, that number wasn’t a problem for now; but a practical countermeasure had to be found.

In addition, after the completion of the space station, there would be an unending list of tasks, such as specific plans for manned investigations of Mars and probe ship design.

Come to think of it, Kouki said his friends were coming over

today.

Based on what was written in a report detailing an investigation of Kouki's friends, they would be with Megumi Aikawa, who had been admitted to the academy after the recognition of her thesis on space development.

"Well, I've been unable to come up with any good ideas... Looks like there's nothing I can do," I said aloud as if making excuses to myself. I began preparing some tea so I'd be ready to welcome Kouki's friends.

**

Kouki Arakawa's Point of View

I had friends over in my room. *I understand why Saito and Alice are here... but why does Aikawa have to be here?! I wondered. Lately, she'd been getting on really well with Saito. Whatever happened to the Aikawa who said, "Make sure you rank in the top 10 out of our year group?" I don't remember her being this cutesy girl who rests against Saito with her eyes half closed!*

Damn, I'm so jealous.

When Aikawa had found out that I didn't need to take tests, she had been furious once again, but Saito had told Aikawa, "Arakawa made a measurement drone crash into a ballistic missile. Would you have been able to make that calculation, Aikawa?" and Aikawa had become less sure of herself.

I knew it had just been a coincidence, but if Aikawa wanted to show her appreciation, she should have fallen in love with me. *Why did it have to be Saito?!*

As I was muttering to myself, Alice whispered in my ear, "I heard that Saito helped out Aikawa when some guys in town gave her some trouble."

Oh? I didn't think Saito was such a man of action. That made it easier to accept Aikawa's behavior. He's like a prince on a white horse who came to save her just as some delinquents were about to attack her.

"I heard that he used that robot..." she added.

Okay, now I get it. If he used that thing, he'd make any kind of thug run off at top speed, I thought to myself while looking over at Saito and Aikawa. Aikawa was letting Saito use her lap as

a pillow. *I wish they'd go home already.... or anywhere that isn't my room. Though the way things are going, maybe Alice will be okay with it if I dive into her lap...* But before I could try it, Mom entered the room.

I was just thinking about how she'd ruined my opportunity and was about to complain, when I realized that everyone except myself was extremely on edge.

Oh, right. I might be with her all the time, but to every other academy student, she's the genius Miki Arakawa, and they'd want to meet her more than any useless idol.

She'd been with us on the field trip to the workplace as our guide, but she'd been quickly called away somewhere, and no one had gotten a chance to talk to her. It was no surprise that meeting a great researcher like my mom would be a dream for everyone here. I felt a little down because I was just in their way, so I made myself small in the corner of the room.

"I've got something to talk about with everyone," said Mom before discussing her research with them.

To be honest, I was sure a genius on my mom's level was quite capable of solving the problem without discussing it with academy students. In reality, she was just doing them a favor by giving them the chance to interact with a genius such as herself.

Mom really is kind, I thought to myself while watching their discussion. The discussion seemed to be related to a space station.

Alice suggested using medicines to alleviate stress, and Saito said that the dangerous work could be performed using a remotely operated robot. Mom listened while writing down all of the ideas enthusiastically in her notebook.

Aikawa's suggestion was surprising.

"I think the environment inside the space station should be made close to that of the Earth. The advantages would be..."

I was surprised to see her explain based on some highly specialist opinions.

"I guess space-related topics must be Aikawa's specialty?" I asked Saito.

"Buh hee? That's right, Megumi specializes in space environments."

"I thought so. Wait, Saito, you're calling Aikawa 'Megumi' now? You must be getting along really well if you're calling her by her first name," I said, teasing him a little.

Saito stopped talking and turned bright red.

I wish I could get on a little better with Alice, I thought to myself as the discussion began winding down.

Mom exchanged email addresses with everyone so she could regularly ask them for their opinions in future.

Is it okay to do that? Those are for private matters, you know? I was thinking when Baldy burst into the room as if he would destroy the doorknob.

"We have an emergency situation!" he declared.

Every time you show up, there's an emergency situation! I thought furiously.

**

Two hours after Baldy had barged in, we had arrived at the

megafloat of the Japan Space Development Division, offshore in the Pacific Ocean. We had flown here in a helicopter that Baldy had prepared. Everyone in my room had been forced to travel with us, probably for security reasons.

Only Aikawa was happy. "This is the megafloat? This is amazing!" she said.

Everyone else was nervous, and Saito looked ready to vomit from motion sickness.

"What's going on? It's my responsibility to keep these children safe. If it comes to it, I can contact my husband and have him take control of this float." Mom's expression was more fearsome than I'd ever seen as she made her complaints to the staff of the facility.

Mom... I don't think it'll do any good to contact Macho Man, I thought. I suppose he could probably swim to us across the ocean, but when he gets here, he'll just be held down by the security staff.

Just then, as I was feeling sick for different reasons than Saito, someone who seemed to be the commander began explaining things.

"The rocket that Kouki launched into space has been discovered by the Russian Space Force. What's more, the Russians violated our pact: They tried and failed to retrieve the rocket. The rocket is currently flying back toward Earth."

Oh! That thing... Oh no, that thing is coming back? If that happens, my life is over. I'll lose everything I've ever worked for in life.

I trembled while listening to the commander speak, but as he spoke, I saw there was hope.

“When the United Nations received the report, they gave the United Nations Space Forces orders to sortie immediately. In order to intercept the rocket, a fleet is converging on its orbit.”

Yes! That’s great! Just blow it to pieces, I thought to myself.

“What does that have to do with us? Do you have the authority to confine these children here?” Mom demanded.

“Well, the situation is... The United Nations said they’d like the person who made the interception strategy to participate...”

“In that case, shouldn’t having me here be enough? These children can return home immediately.”

Hold on, Mom. The commander is already under a lot of pressure, so don’t bully him. Besides, I want to see what happens to that thing.

I told Mom that I was willing to participate. Everyone else also assured her that they were remaining here willingly. After that, Mom said, “I suppose I can’t stop you,” and gave in to the commander.

Just now, he mentioned a pact. What was that about? Feeling curious, I quietly asked Mom.

“Nothing for you to worry about,” she replied with a false smile.

I’d better not worry about it, I decided.

Some time ago, there had been an incident in which Macho Man had pressed Mom when she’d smiled that way, and I didn’t even want to remember the result of that.

The commander soon informed the fleet captain that we were

going to participate, and the captain told us, “If it comes to it, we’ll stop the rocket even by ramming it.”

I don’t think you have to go that far, I thought. If worse comes to worst, I’ll find some way to live with the shame of my humiliating past. Anyhow, any object in space will burn up as it reenters the atmosphere, and even if it does fall, it’s bound to land in the ocean or in the desert. The chances of it landing on a city are negligible. There’s no need to risk your life. If anyone should take responsibility, it’s the Russian Space Force for doing something stupid.

“Well, then, let’s execute the rocket interception operation: ‘Operation Pandora,’” said the commander. “We mustn’t give up hope before it’s over.”

Wait a minute, could there be a big misunderstanding here? That thing isn’t something dangerous. What’s all this about how, “If we fail to intercept it, Earth will...”? It seemed to have become such a big deal, I didn’t feel like I could speak out.

The contents of that thing are just S&M erotic magazines that I didn’t know how to throw away...

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Fleet Captain, Geoff Auld's Point of View

Our blue Earth was visible from the bridge.

My granddaughter Mary is on that planet. We absolutely can't allow this operation to fail. This would never have even happened if those Russian idiots hadn't broken the Arakawa Pact. If the Russian forces hadn't become so greedy and touched the Arakawa relic...

I ground my teeth while I thought about it. Just then, a transmission arrived. It had been sent by the United States President, my son, William Auld.

“Commander, your orders are to initiate Operation Pandora,” he declared. “The fate of the Earth is in your hands. Do whatever it takes to complete this mission. Mary is here on Earth. I beg you, Father.”

I answered William's transmission with a salute.

My stupid son... I know that without you having to tell me. I absolutely won't allow the rocket to arrive on Earth. The intelligence department reported that the contents are probably a weaponized virus. Whatever happens, it must be shot down while still in space.

I firmed my resolve and confirmed the fleet formation with my intelligence officer.

“At present, there are three destroyers deployed above us, and mother ships carrying spacecraft, two on our left and two on our right.”

“Understood. Stand by in position until I give the order. Have the mother ships be ready to launch their spacecraft immedi-

ately.”

Everything was going as planned. For our first real battle, things were going well. All that remained was to wait for something to appear on radar; but for the crew, this was a difficult time because there was nothing they could do.

I'm counting on you. Stay strong and stand by.

“We have a radar response! Target acquired,” the intelligence officer suddenly shouted after twenty minutes had passed.

It's finally happening. I adjusted myself in my seat and gave my orders. “Launch all spacecraft immediately. Shoot down the target. All remaining ships, prepare to fire a barrage in the event that our attempts to shoot down the target fail.”

After receiving my orders, the spacecraft all began advancing toward the target. I watched the state of the battle using a central screen. The rocket was remarkably good at evading, and things weren't going well. I was about to give another instruction, but the intelligence officer raised his voice and gave a report.

“A magnetic storm is currently emerging from the sun, preventing contact from being made. We're currently unable to contact our consort ships or the Earth!”

It seems humankind just isn't ready to perform organized military operations in space... But if we give up now, that rocket will reach the Earth. I gazed at the screen while thinking of the best course of action. *It's no good. I can't think of anything, and I'm just wasting time.*

Just then, I noticed that a destroyer behind our ship had begun to move forward.

What the hell are they doing?! I gave no instructions. We're

already in the worst possible situation. Don't go making things worse!

As I turned to face the intelligence officer, we received a report: "We have received an optical transmission from the destroyer Orto: 'WE'RE HEADING FOR TARGET. FOR THE GLORY OF THE SPACE FORCES.' I repeat...."

Preposterous! They're going to self-destruct?!

I sent back an optical signal to stop them, but Orto continued on without hesitating.

I know that this is the only way, but there's no reason for you to be sacrificed. It should be my responsibility.

Orto was already too far away to be seen, and my gaze shifted to the screen where I could monitor him.

The scene that I saw made me doubt my own vision. A mysterious, gigantic object collided with the rocket! After colliding with an object of that size, the rocket had no doubt been obliterated without a trace. The deployed spacecraft and Orto, which had been heading toward the object, took drastic evasive maneuvers.

"What is that thing?" I asked the intelligence officer.

"Analysis complete. That object is an asteroid. This is... This is terrible! It's now on a collision course with Earth!"

I'd been thrown into the depths of despair. The space forces currently had no means of stopping an asteroid. Even if of our ships were to ram it, it would have no effect.

I sent out an optical signal urging all ships to withdraw so we could reestablish communications with Earth.

Shingo Saito's Point of View

Soon after the interception operation had begun, we'd lost the ability to contact the fleet. The reason was some kind of magnetic storm. I didn't really get it, but Megumi kindly explained to me.

Megumi told me that communications couldn't be sent because of the strong magnetism, and that this was occasionally a cause for artificial satellites to break down. I listened gratefully, and Megumi asked curiously about the contents carried inside the rocket.

"Shin, what do you think is really inside there?"

I told her I had no idea what the contents were, either, and she took my hand and said, "Well, let's just hope things go okay."

My heart raced as I squeezed her hand in response and thought to myself, *Everyone is saying it contains a weaponized virus or devastating bomb, but I think Kouki is too gentle a person to make such things. I wonder if it contains some kind of diary or something similar that he doesn't want people to see.*

While I was thinking to myself, someone from the observation team came running out. He was busy saying something to Arakawa's mom.

I tried listening and heard him say, "The asteroid has changed course and is approaching Earth. At this rate it will collide with Earth."

Now what? I didn't understand much about space, but I knew enough to know that this was a serious situation.

"Don't we have people and equipment that can travel to the asteroid and destroy it or change its course?" I asked Arakawa's

mom, and she replied with a troubled look.

“This probably happened because two asteroids collided, but there’s no way to do what you’re suggesting. I had predicted that it wouldn’t collide with us, or if it did, it would be far in the future. Either way, there’s nothing we can do right now. If we had a large number of robots at our disposal that were each capable of carrying out a programmed task, that would change the situation, but we have to do something with what we have on hand.”

Arakawa’s mom was busy, so she walked away as soon as she’d finished speaking.

Standalone robots... I do have an idea about that, I realized.

Megumi tugged my sleeve and said, “Do you think those little ones could do something?”

Megumi had had the same idea as me. But if we did that, Chabane and his assistants would die.

I thought hard about it, but I couldn’t think of any other ideas. I turned to everyone and said, “I can prepare a large number of robots that work independently.”

Arakawa’s mom and the development division heard what I’d said and asked me for more details. I told them how I’d developed Chabane. I told them that he was installed with high-grade AI and could make his own decisions to some extent. I told them he could repeatedly self-replicate until we had the number of units we needed.

Everyone began to act immediately. We asked the self-defense forces and the United Nation forces to prepare missile boosters that Chabane and his assistants could be loaded onto, and to prepare explosives that could be placed on the asteroid to change its course.

Someone was about to head off to fetch the main Chabane, but I told him, “He can get here by himself.”

His eyes widened, and he smiled a little.

**

Three hours later, we were on a rocket launchpad of the megafloat. Before my eyes were enough Chabanes to cover the entire sky.

I'm sure I told him not to replicate more than necessary. Just how many are there now? I thought to myself as one out of the many descending Chabanes walked toward me.

“Master, sorry to have kept you waiting. After some additional replication, I have assembled 2,613 units.”

“Buh hee?! You can talk now?” I asked Chabane in surprise.

He replied full of confidence. “Of course! We were created by our genius master. If we weren’t able to talk, it would be an insult to our master’s name.” Then he hugged me.

Chabane seemed so happy as he hugged me, but I had no choice but to ask for something awful from him: “Go to the asteroid and change its course, but you won’t be able to return.” There was no way I could say that to him!!

I hung my head, unable to stop the flow of tears, and Chabane said, “We intercepted a transmission on the way here. We understand the situation. Master... we were created to be of service to you. So please, see us off with a smile.”

I couldn’t hold back the tears anymore. “I’m sorry! I’m so sorry! Relying on you is our only option.” I told him that while crying, and Chabane remained silent while stroking my hair.

The booster of each Chabane was lit as soon as they finished preparing, and they were launched into space.

Finally, the remaining original Chabane turned to face me.

“I have one request. A copy of our AI and the improvements we’ve achieved are recorded on this card. As long as you have this, you can make us again.”

With that, he handed me a memory card.

Even using this, I can’t recreate the same Chabane. Chabane himself must know that. He’s just saying it to stop me from crying. It’s no use! I’ll definitely cry, so it’s no use. Just for these final moments, I’ll see him off with a smile.

I did all I could to hold back the tears and smiled as we parted. “Take care of yourself, Chabane...”

“I’ll see you soon, Master.”

With that, Chabane jumped up and left. Even after I couldn’t see him any longer, I couldn’t take my eyes off the sky.

Megumi hugged me.

Unable to resist any longer, I began to cry.

“I’m sure the little ones will think of something,” Megumi said to console me as she began to cry just like me.

“We’ve reestablished communications with the United Nations Space Force. The content of their transmission is, ‘What are those objects flying from Earth toward the asteroid?’ How should we respond?”

“Tell them, ‘Our friends are heading there to resolve the situa-

tion.” Arakawa’s mom gave her instructions to the person sending the transmission.

Friends... Chabane certainly was my precious friend... He might be heading out into space, but that doesn’t change the fact that he’ll always be my precious friend.

We returned to the interior of the float and waited for the results. Then a report arrived.

“We have detected explosions on the exterior and in the interior of the asteroid. The asteroid is leaving the collision course!”

The Chabanes’ work was a success.

Thank you, thank you so much. I began to cry again; not from sadness this time, but from gratitude.

Several hundred years later, humanity would engage in a full-blown exploration of space and would discover an unknown form of intelligent life on a certain asteroid.

That life form had already been forgotten. It was an incredibly friendly life form that spoke the Japanese language of Earth and addressed humankind as “Master.”

A mechanical life form known as the automata.

Chapter 6: The Arakawa Particle

“Critical failure has occurred. Laboratory Block E-2 will be isolated. Researchers please evacuate immediately. I repeat...”

As the alarm was being issued by an unnatural sounding mechanical voice, I held my head in my hands, trying to figure out how it had come to this. I could see Mom screaming at the other side of the block.

You’ve done enough! Hurry up and escape! I thought. I’ll input the termination program into the apparatus, so there’s no need to worry! This all started with me doing something unnecessary. I’ll take responsibility!

Rather than evacuating, I turned to face Mom who was busy yelling something, and I opened my mouth wide to tell her, “Thank you for raising me.” Then I inputted the program into the particle converter in front of me.

Looks like a self-destruction procedure started...

The scenery around me began rapidly distorting. Finally, my vision abruptly went black...

**

Kouki Arakawa's Point of View

The Academy was closed for the day, and I was visiting my mom while she worked on her main project at the Space Particle Research Institute. Mom had said she really wanted me to help her investigate new particles. I didn't think my being there would be of any use to her, but I couldn't refuse after she smiled and said, "Please." If I had refused, I'd just have been repeating the same mistakes I'd seen Macho Man make, so that wasn't an option.

"Kouki, this way," my guide from the institute told me.

They really do have a lot of equipment here, I thought as I looked off to one side. Isn't that thing over there a personal particle rifle? What are they doing with a thing like that?

My guide saw me looking and explained it to me. "We use that in particle research. Most information might be of no relevance, but we have no way of knowing where we might find some hint."

He went on to explain that Block E-2, where Mom was waiting, had an armory filled with everything from military-use powered suits to experimental gravitational collapse bombs.

If Saito heard about this, he'd probably get excited and start acting weird, I thought as we continued walking.

Before long, we arrived at what appeared to be our destination.

Mom gave me a smile and said, "I see you've brought Kouki with you. Well, then, the experiment will begin in five minutes." Then she began to prepare the experiment.

I feel like I really shouldn't be here.

The researchers around me were even exchanging whispers as they looked to me. I imagined most of them were saying, *Why is there a kid here?* Whenever I looked at them and they looked away from me quickly, I started to feel as if I might cry.

Not wanting to get in the way... or rather, not wanting any other researchers to see me, I moved to a desk in the corner of the room and sat there quietly. From there, I watched over the experiment while making sure my expression didn't betray thoughts like, *I can't wait to get home and laze around.*

"Okay, let's begin the experiment," my mom announced.

A piece of apparatus in the room began to whirr, and an alarm sounded. But nothing happened.

Mom tried starting the apparatus once more, but again, nothing happened, and an awkward feeling filled the room.

All of the researchers turned to face me in unison.

"What do you think?" one of them asked me.

How should I know? Why are you even asking me?! I don't even know what you're researching or what you're trying to do.

I tried asking Mom what kind of response would be considered a success, and it seemed they wanted to see an instantaneous flash. According to Mom, if the particle could be observed as predicted, there'd be a connection to another space and the surroundings of the apparatus would momentarily jump into the other space. The particle would then be destroyed, releasing its energy, which would cause an instantaneous flash.

I don't get it at all. But I don't feel like I can say that when everyone is expecting so much from me, so I'll just say something that sounds sensible.

“Make the testing area darker, don’t let even the slightest bit of light be overlooked,” I said. “And please turn up the instrument output a little.”

After the researchers had put my ideas into practice, they tried the experiment again, and unsurprisingly nothing happened.

Well, what did you expect? If I could think up a way to make the experiment work, Mom would have been able to make it work already.

Feeling disheartened, I watched the researchers hold a discussion while I took a particle structure model in my hand and began idly rearranging it to pass the time.

“Kouki, that’s... That’s it!! That’s the answer,” Mom suddenly shouted while looking at the model that I was holding.

Hold on, I’ve got a bad feeling about this... This is that same feeling I had when I struck down the ballistic missile and everyone had a “misunderstanding.”

I desperately tried to get this through to Mom, but she simply replied, “Don’t worry! I know exactly what you want to say, Kou,” and she didn’t listen to me.

“Mom... you don’t understand anything,” I mumbled in a quiet voice, but she didn’t hear. *And you’ve started casually calling me Kou again.*

Mom was in serious-mode, giving out instructions with fear-some energy, and there was no way to stop her. All I could do was quietly watch. When the preparations were finally over, Mom tried the experiment again.

“Light emission phenomenon confirmed!” a researcher cried.

Everyone in the room began to cheer. I watched it all going on around me, and then I realized something.

The light was getting stronger.

Other people seem to have realized it, too, and they were frantically trying to shut off the apparatus, but they didn't seem to be having much success. A sensor that had detected an anomaly then began to sound an alarm.

“Critical failure has occurred. Laboratory Block E-2 will be isolated. Researchers, please evacuate immediately. I repeat...”

Everyone in the room ran for the exit all at once. Another researcher had grabbed Mom by the arm and was urging her to evacuate.

I, on the other hand, couldn't keep up with everything that was happening. My knees felt weak, and I couldn't move.

“Um, someone...” I wanted someone to carry me, but my voice just trailed off into nothing.

Isn't this the kind of time when that old guy, Baldy, should be showing up?! Where the hell is he right now?!

Then an isolation door slid shut before my eyes.

**

Miki Arakawa's Point of View

I'd been in a good mood since this morning because of Kouki coming to help with my research today.

I heard my staff talking in whispers around me.

"So, this boy is her son?"

"I heard he recently created a cure for the European tragedy."

My son himself sat in a chair at a desk in the corner of the room and watched over us, probably so he could take in everything at his leisure.

A feeling of confidence grew inside of me. *There's no way we can fail...*

This experiment would use the equation that Kouki had constructed to prove that other dimensions actually existed. It had been decided that the particle we expected to observe would be known as the "Arakawa particle." I wanted it to be named the "Kouki particle," after its true discoverer, but that was rejected because it didn't roll off the tongue as well.

Once all of the preparations were complete, I said, "Okay, let's begin the experiment," and pressed the activation switch.

But nothing happened. I tried the experiment once more, but once again, nothing happened.

"What could be wrong?" a member of my staff asked me.

I had no answers, and let it slip that I was wondering what Kouki was thinking. In that instant, everyone turned to face Kouki in unison. Kouki opened his mouth in shock as everyone

looked at him.

“Make the testing area darker, don’t let even the slightest bit of light be overlooked,” he said at last. “And please turn up the apparatus output a little.”

I’m sure he was shocked. It was our research, and yet we’d given up thinking for ourselves and were relying on a child. We put his ideas into practice and tried the experiment again, but there was absolutely no reaction.

I gathered my staff to discuss it, but we were forced to conclude that the experiment had ended in failure.

Just then, I looked over to Kouki and saw that he was doing something with a particle model. He had rapidly rearranged it into something that blew me away...

My predicted particle bonding was wrong?!

I suspected that Kouki had known from the start that the experiment would fail. However, if he’d said that right away, he would have wounded our pride. Having reached that conclusion, he was only showing us his original solution now that our experiment had failed.

After inputting the bonding model that Kouki had made, I began the experiment for the third time.

“Light emission phenomenon confirmed!”

When I heard the announcement, I was elated! Kouki’s equation hadn’t been wrong. But I soon realized that something wasn’t quite right. The light emission phenomenon wasn’t diminishing in the slightest. In fact, the affected area was gradually growing.

An emergency alarm sounded.

“Critical failure has occurred. Laboratory Block E-2 will be isolated. Researchers please evacuate immediately. I repeat...”

One of my staff members led me to safety, but Kouki wasn't with us.

“Where's Kouki?! Did my boy get out?” I screamed.

As I was screaming, I saw Kouki still at the other side of the block. He was smiling strangely as if the problem was something minor.

This is serious; why aren't you evacuating?! I wanted to scream.

Then I saw Kouki pick up the emergency termination manual that was sitting by the particle converter.

“He stayed behind to stop it?” I cried.

We had put our own safety first and evacuated while the boy had been alone in thinking about how to stop the apparatus. We all realized that we had forced a child to do the work that should have been handled by our employees.

Even though it was too late, we started trying to pry open the isolation doors so we could do it ourselves. However, once closed, the isolation doors couldn't be opened without following proper procedure.

Amidst it all, I saw Kouki turn toward me and mouth some words to me.

Tha. Yuu. Fo. Rai. Sin. Me.

“Thank you for raising me” was probably what he was saying.

I pounded on the isolation door, oblivious to the blood dripping from my palms. “Kouki! Kouki!!”

A dreadful thought occurred to me: this might be our final parting. He must have finished entering the termination program because he turned to me with a satisfied look on his face.

My son and the research block both disappeared before my eyes.

May 20, 2102: Critical Failure at the Space Particle Research Institute.

Although no researchers or civil employees were injured, Kouki Arakawa, the son of lead researcher Miki Arakawa, was caught up in the incident, and his whereabouts afterward were unknown.

Numerous pieces of prototype military-use equipment were stored in the vanished Laboratory Block E-2, and a search for the missing person and a simultaneous search for the missing equipment were both considered to be matters of urgency.

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Kouki Arakawa's Point of View

I woke up and looked at the area around me. I saw the disordered contents of the room and the destroyed particle converter.

“I’m quite sure I managed to input the termination program,” I said to no one in particular.

I wonder if the termination was successful? If that’s the case, someone should have come here to help me right away. Does that mean it failed?

I thought about it for some time without reaching a conclusion before eventually deciding that I should find out what was happening outside.

“Oh man, I can’t open the isolation door.” I stood before the closed isolation door doing my best to pry it open, but it wouldn’t budge.

I sat down in front of the isolation door and tried to think of a plan. I remembered the person who’d guided me here telling me that powered suits and suchlike were stored somewhere in this block.

I searched the area trying to find the storage room, and found a powered suit on the other side of a broken, reinforced door that was hanging off.

“Storage room?” I murmured. “This is more like an armory.”

Inside, I saw numerous military-use weapons densely packed into the room. Each item was conveniently accompanied by an instruction manual, presumably so that they could be used by researchers without training.

After looking over the equipment, I equipped a prototype powered suit for use in outer space that looked like it would hold out even if a fire was blazing on the other side of the isolation door. There was an angel design drawn on its chest, probably because it could fly above the clouds.

I used it to pry open the isolation door, and beyond the door, I found wreckage and a swarm of robots that seemed to be surrounding the area.

For a moment I panicked, but I hadn't died once and then gotten reincarnated just for show. I kept calm and focused on grasping the situation.

1. Where am I? The suit's GPS and the position information on my terminal aren't functioning, so I don't know.

2. Who's surrounding this place? I've detected no country-specific identification signals, and the appearance of the robots gives me nothing to go on.

3. Have I been reincarnated again? I have no memory of dying, and the probability seems low based on my surroundings, but it's unclear.

In conclusion, everything was unclear.

This sucks... I'm so tense that I think I might wet myself. I just want to go home.

One of the robots from the robot squad before me began flying toward me. It suddenly spoke to me in Japanese: "Tell us who you're associated with."

Is this Japan? I wondered.

As I was trying figure that out, it spoke up. "Everyone, disen-

gage your weapons! Show some respect to our messiah.”

It spoke in a loud voice that reverberated through the surrounding area. The robots around us immediately came toward me, and they all made a movement that I thought was a salute.

Wait just a minute. By “messiah,” do they mean me?

“Please accept our apologies, Messiah,” the robot said formally. “Would you be so kind as to accompany us?”

I couldn’t quite grasp what was happening. The only thing I could say was, “Okay.”

**

Nina Ackroyd's Point of View

My birthplace, the Ackroyd Empire, had been at war with the demon lord's army.

Two years ago, my father, His Majesty the King, had ordered the full-scale mobilization of his empire and gambled the empire in its entirety on a decisive victory against the demon lord.

There had been many great battles and minor skirmishes, and we had suffered countless casualties, but today we had finally surrounded the demon lord's castle. We'd believed that this would mean victory, but what had been waiting for the soldiers of the empire's armies was pure despair.

Demons had poured out of the demon lord's castle in numbers beyond counting. We had only just barely been able to surround the area, and we weren't sure we had the strength remaining for such a fight.

Perhaps it's impossible for us to continue fighting? I thought desperately.

Morale was plummeting, and defeat seemed inevitable from the very start. But then something happened.

The surroundings of the demon lord's castle suddenly became distorted and were bathed in an intense white light. For a moment, I closed my eyes as if I'd been staring directly at the sun.

When I next opened my eyes, what I saw was the wreckage of the demon lord's castle, which had been blown apart, with not a single part left standing.

The demons that had been pouring out had also disappeared without a trace. The extent of the destruction was such that only

the remains of an elder dragon, which were said to have unrivaled toughness, was just barely discernible. A building of unknown nature seemed to have materialized in the center of it all.

“Princess, what shall we do?” a soldier who also served within my imperial guard asked me.

What makes you think I've got all the answers?! I wanted to yell angrily; but I was the highest ranking authority here, so I couldn't do that.

The best I could do was give an order to buy some time: “All forces, encircle the area and keep watch. If anything moves, do not attack carelessly.”

What even is that thing?! I thought wildly. Maybe it's the work of an ally, but if they had a weapon this powerful, they would have first sought a favor from our country in exchange. Does that mean we're facing a new enemy?

“This is a nightmare,” I moaned.

That's right, a nightmare. Fighting against an enemy who could blow up the demon lord's castle and kill an elder dragon with a single blow will be no laughing matter. No human could stand against such an opponent.

“There's movement! Something is emerging from inside!” called out one of my soldiers.

That brought me to my senses. Indeed, a figure was emerging from the building. It was awfully big; I estimated that it was roughly twice the size of the magic armor we were using. The thing that emerged didn't attack us; it simply stood there.

“What shall we do? There's only one opponent. We could all strike now,” the soldier counseled.

“Wait, I’m going to take a closer look,” I said. “Don’t attack before then. If anything happens, destroy me with it.”

Not that you’d stand a chance, I thought. But I stopped myself from saying that. There’s no way you could defeat that thing, and all of our allies would be obliterated in an instant.

I was biting my lip as I arrived in front of the thing.

Majestic... That seemed to be the right word to describe the appearance of this thing. Despite being surrounded by so many soldiers, it stood there completely at ease.

“Tell us who you’re associated with,” I asked it.

In response, its neck moved just slightly so as to face me.

It seemed it had some intelligence. If it only had the intelligence of a creature like an orc or a goblin, that would be a problem, but if we could have a discussion, we might be able to resolve this peacefully.

I was slightly relieved and felt able to look at the thing calmly. Then I realized that the emblem of angels was drawn on the thing’s chest.

I immediately understood: the thing was a messiah sent by the gods as humanity’s savior. I instinctively began giving orders to my subjects.

“Show respect to our messiah!”

As expected of well-trained soldiers, they acted on my words before they had time to form doubts.

As it should be. It would not do to show Him disrespect.

I chose my words carefully before addressing Him. “Please accept our apologies, Messiah. Would you be so kind as to accompany us?”

In response, he quietly consented. “Okay.”

I quickly gave instructions to my men, and the imperial capital was informed that the war against the demon lord had ended together with the appearance of the messiah. His Majesty the King then declared that I was to guide him to the castle so that the king might thank him personally.

As I was guiding the messiah to the imperial capital, I realized that I’d been so rude that I hadn’t removed my magic armor to greet him face-to-face.

I regretted it so much that I thought I might die.

✱✱

Kouki Arakawa's Point of View

The road ahead was filled completely by the people cheering.

That wasn't really too surprising, since we'd just put an end to the Demon Lord War after two long years. Although the whole thing happened completely by chance...

Oh man, my stomach is in knots.

Princess Nina, who had been piloting one of those robot things, had already told me a lot by the time we reached this point on the road.

She told me about the hopeless and devastating war they had fought, and she told me more about this world.

It seemed that in addition to having been reincarnated, I'd now traveled to another world. The place where I'd materialized had been the interior of the demon lord's castle; and the aftermath had not only obliterated the castle, but had also blown away all of the demons.

"It just happened by chance. I wasn't aiming for anything," I told her.

"Of course. If the messiah had gotten serious, there wouldn't have even been any wreckage left."

I tried explaining, but she didn't understand at all; her interpretation was way off.

You know, it could have been a disaster. If the place where I'd materialized had just been shifted by just 500 meters, the imperial army would have been blown away. If that had happened, one hour after traveling here, I'd have been overrun by the demon

lord's army and killed. Even in a story, you wouldn't expect anyone to be able to just immediately start fighting the demon lord right after traveling.

The whole time we were talking, the carriage I'd been riding in had been steadily approaching the king's castle. When we were close enough to see the castle gates, I noticed someone kneeling on the ground.

The carriage approached and then stopped, and the person surprised me by saying, "Welcome to my country, Messiah. I am King Wolfric Ackroyd."

Why would the king be kneeling in wait for me?! I thought in disbelief. Couldn't his imperial guard stop him?!

Ordinary behavior for someone like this would be to look at me with suspicion and claim that no one needs a messiah.

Even if there is a misunderstanding, you shouldn't be humbling yourself before me like this!

"I'm Kouki Arakawa. Thank you for your kind invitation," I said, returning his greeting as calmly as possible.

I made sure not to say the things I was thinking. If I spoke to him like that, he'd probably respond with, "Off with his head!"

"First, please accompany me to the throne room so we can express our gratitude," the king told me. "Over dinner, we can discuss what offerings we'd like to give you."

With that, he guided me into the castle. I was surprised to find that when we reached the throne room, for some reason it was me who was made to sit on the throne.

Everyone who held an important office in the country came

before me to bow their heads, and all expressed gratitude to me for “gracing us with your present manifestation.”

There are so many people here that at least one of them should be able to fully understand what I’m saying, I thought, before interrupting their speeches.

“Everyone, please. Listen to me. I’m...”

I frantically tried to explain.

During an experiment to connect two spaces, I had just happened to arrive in this world. In the other world, my mom and my friends were worrying about me, and if possible, I wanted to return as soon as I could.

I made my explanation as easy to understand as possible. I saw some of the people actually began crying while I was explaining. It seemed as though they sympathized with my situation, and there was even one man that looked like a strong warrior who began crying while looking at me.

I was relieved that I’d been able to make them understand. Nina then told me, “There is a way for you to return, Messiah!” and she explained the details.

The gist was that this country had a secret technique known as the “hero summoning ritual.” If I strongly wished to return to my own world while they were performing the ritual, I’d be able to return.

Magic is awesome!

Come to think of it, the fact that I was able to talk to them like this had to be because there was some sort of constantly-active translation magic.

My mom was always saying, “Nothing compares to science!” but if I showed her how things worked in this world, she’d probably fall flat on her face.

Nina and everyone are so kind. I wonder if they’ll let me return home with a souvenir. Later I’ll try coming up with an excuse for asking, I thought to myself as we moved to another room to have dinner.

“This is Kurghitos salad.”

The food they served at dinner was delicious. Let me put that more eloquently: The food was insanely delicious!

What is this? Based on the name, it was a food unique to this world, and the taste was something I’d never experienced. They told me that they would perform the ritual to send me home tomorrow morning, so I enjoyed the food served at dinner without worrying.

Then the king began to speak with a strange look on his face. “The truth is, I have a favor to ask of you, Messiah.”

I was in a good mood, so I urged him to continue, and said that I’d do what I could to grant his request. At this point it seemed I was stuck with the name “Messiah.”

“So that we might deal with any further calamities caused by demons in the future, would it be possible for you to leave just a fraction of your power in this world?”

Well, if it’s helping people, I don’t mind.

After warning them that it might not be much use, I answered, “In that case, I’ll leave behind some gravitational collapse bombs, the suit I’m using, and twenty laser rifles, along with the instruction manuals.”

“We’re truly grateful!” he cried. “Thank you so much!”

“Don’t worry about it!” I said. “You’re helping me get home, after all, so this much is fair.”

I followed up by mentioning that for a while now, I’d been wondering whether I might receive something to commemorate the occasion.

The king then gave me a dragon scale, a nationally treasured gazelle butterfly specimen, and a set of armor worn by imperial knights. Nina gave me a silver wolf blanket.

Afterward, I returned to the room they’d given me with a grin on my face.

The next day, I was following Nina’s instructions as I made preparations to return home in the room where the ritual would be held. As the sorcerers were charging their magic, I asked a question that had been bothering me all this time.

“If you’d summoned a hero at the start, wouldn’t the war have ended sooner?”

“If the hero hadn’t had the ability to defeat the demon lord, it would have been futile,” Nina told me. “Our sorcerers don’t have enough magic power to be able to take such chances.”

I see... That makes sense. They aimed to solve things by themselves without using power wastefully.

I felt admiration for these people as the sorcerers told me that preparations were complete.

I guess it’s time to go home...

I turned to Nina to say my goodbyes.

“Well then, this is goodbye, Nina.”

“Thank you so much, Messiah.”

As I entered the summoning circle, I secretly took a picture of Nina using the camera function of my terminal, and then focused my mind on my original world.

The king, who was standing near me, told me, “When our sorcerers are done recovering their power, we’ll continue by returning the items you’ve left behind, Messiah.”

My vision then went black once again...

**

Nina Ackroyd's Point of View

While I was explaining our world to the messiah, our carriage soon arrived at the imperial capital.

On the way, we passed through numerous portals, and the messiah inspected them with great interest each time. That sort of technology probably wasn't used anymore in the world of the gods where the messiah lived.

As we continued on to the castle and joined the main road, the townspeople began cheering loudly.

“Long live the king! Long live Nina!”

“Hoorah! The demon lord is defeated!!”

It was these smiles I wanted to protect, and it's all thanks to the Messiah sitting beside me, I thought, smiling, as His Majesty the King, who was kneeling in wait, came into view.

A crowd gathered, trying to catch a glimpse of the messiah who even His Majesty would wait for in such a pose.

The carriage then stopped before His Majesty.

“Welcome to my country, Messiah. I am King Wolfric Ackroyd.”

“I'm Kouki Arakawa,” the messiah said. “Thank you for your kind invitation.”

As the two exchanged greetings, the messiah surprised me. Even though he had shown us such power, he interacted with his Majesty without even a hint of self-importance. I'd have forgiven him for yelling, “Don't address me so casually, you worms!” But

by addressing the king as an equal, he allowed us to keep our dignity.

I wish this country's idiotic nobles would take a lesson from him, I thought ruefully.

“First, please accompany me to the throne room so we can express our gratitude,” His Majesty said. “Over dinner, we can discuss what offerings we’d like to give you.”

It seemed we were going to move to a new location. I took the opportunity to return to my room and change into a formal dress before hurrying to the throne room.

There, everyone who worked at the castle, from army officers to civil officials, were bowing before the messiah to express their gratitude, but the messiah didn’t look pleased.

Why would he be unhappy? I wondered. Then he suddenly began to speak.

“Everyone, please. Listen to me. I’m...”

I was shocked by what he had to say. It turned out that it had been entirely by chance that he had seen our tragedy unfolding through a tunnel connecting the world of the gods to our world. Ignoring the protests of those around him, he had forced the sacred *particle converter* to stop and risked everything to intervene in our world.

What a compassionate being... I thought. *He came to save us even though it meant sacrificing himself.*

Everyone was so moved by his self-sacrifice and compassion that they began to cry. Even Axe Kyou, a man considered the archetypal warrior, began to softly weep.

Unsurprisingly, the messiah's one regret was having to leave his family and friends behind. He told us, "I'd like to return if possible."

No sooner had he spoken that an idea occurred to me. I yelled, "There is a way for you to return, Messiah!"

When I told him there was a way, I saw the messiah smile for first time. Everyone present supported the use of the summoning ritual, and Axe Kyou left his seat, excitedly shouting, "Gather all the sorcerers in the kingdom!"

After the commotion in the throne room, we attended a peaceful banquet. Dishes prepared to the best of the court cook's ability were served to the messiah, who found them to his liking.

His Majesty then made an unthinkable request.

"So that we might deal with any further calamities caused by demons in future, would it be possible for you to leave just a fraction of your power in this world?"

For a moment, the atmosphere was tense as we feared the messiah would be displeased by the request and would reduce the empire to ashes overnight.

Does His Majesty understand what he's saying? I glanced at His Majesty and saw sweat was running down his face as he waited for an answer. It seemed he had understood and asked anyway.

Far from reacting as we feared, the messiah replied cheerfully. "In that case, I'll leave behind some gravitational collapse bombs, the suit I'm using, and twenty laser rifles, along with the instruction manuals."

Then, with some hesitation, the messiah asked whether he

might receive something to commemorate helping us defeat the demon lord of this world.

We'd already prepared gifts of the highest quality to give to the messiah, gathered from within the castle, and when we presented these to the messiah, he was pleased and thanked us many times.

The next day, it came time for the messiah to return. While the sorcerers were charging their energy into a summoning circle, the messiah asked me a question with a serious face.

"If you'd summoned a hero at the start, wouldn't the war have ended sooner?"

"If the hero hadn't had the ability to defeat the demon lord, it would have been futile," I explained. "Our sorcerers don't have enough magic power to be able to take such chances."

In the end, I lied to him...

Such things had been discussed, but the conservative nobles had protested, *We don't need no hero!* and hadn't been willing to cooperate. I had chosen words that I thought wouldn't cause him any unnecessary concern on his way home. He seemed to believe me.

The sorcerers then informed us that they had finished their preparations.

"Well then, this is goodbye, Nina," he said.

"Thank you so much, Messiah."

The messiah entered the summoning circle and closed his eyes.

His Majesty, who was standing beside me, quickly told him,

“When our sorcerers are done recovering their power, we’ll continue by returning the items you’ve left behind, Messiah,” and in that moment, the messiah vanished.

“Looks like he made it home,” His Majesty said softly.

He continued to look at the summoning circle with a somewhat lonely gaze, and then finally he recovered his senses and spoke: “Well then, after we’ve dispatched the remaining items, there are some internal problems our kingdom must deal with. Then there’s also the aftermath of the Demon Lord War.”

I looked at him and saw him looking full of life for the first time in two years. I suggested, “Let’s build a statue to honor the messiah who saved this world.”

Later, to be confident that the demon lord had been successfully conquered, the Ackroyd kingdom used the relics of the messiah to drive away the demons that had attacked us so many times; and as a result of continuing to fight without ever giving up, we finally succeeded in eradicating all demons.

It became a rule that all kings were to be given the middle name Arakawa, and children were raised listening to the story of the legendary messiah, the story of how the Messiah had left our world with an ideal future, just “by chance.”

The items left by the messiah were carefully dispatched from the summoning circle as the kingdom had promised. However, we weren’t able to overcome the waves in space very well, and rather than transferring them to the year 2102, they were actually scattered throughout the world of 1915 and claimed by various nations.

Research on these items led to the early conclusion of the Second World War, but that’s another story...

Miki Arakawa's Point of View

It had been two days since Kouki had disappeared before my eyes in the incident. I had arrived at the laboratory block of the Space Particle Research Institute, which remained sealed.

“Kouki, where did you go?” I whispered.

I'd lost count of how many times I had whispered the same unanswerable question.

When I'd contacted Shuuichi, he'd given me encouragement by saying, “That boy's as wise as he is strong. I'm sure he'll return.” But he had appeared depressed when we were together.

When I'd told Kouki's friends about his disappearance, they had also been terribly depressed. In particular, the girl named Alice had seemed to be more shocked than I was as his mother; when I told her, she collapsed on the ground.

“Everyone is worried, so come home soon,” I said quietly.

I was speaking to the empty space that had been so mercilessly hollowed out before my eyes.

It's no good. Being here just makes me feel despair, I thought sadly.

Just as I was about to turn and leave, a reaction just like the one that had happened when the converter went out of control began occurring again.

The space became warped, and a pure white light began to spread out. The flash of light shone brightly for an instant, and then there was Kouki standing before my eyes.

I didn't know how, but he was wearing western-style armor; a cloth glowing silver was in his hand; and he was holding a case containing a specimen of butterfly I'd never seen before.

He noticed me and, after thinking for a while, he tilted his head and said, "Hi, Mom. I'm home," as if he was greeting me after just returning home from school.

I held him while crying... My child who I'd thought I would never see again had returned to me.

"Ouch! Mom, let go!" He looked angry, probably because I'd put too much force into it.

When I asked him where he'd been and what he'd been doing for the last two days, he told me the most incredible story.

With a smile, he explained that he'd "just happened to be transported to a demon lord's castle in another world and destroyed the castle;" he'd been "invited as a state guest by the king of the nation that had been fighting the demon lord;" and he had "received local products as souvenirs when returning home using magic."

My own son's adaptability surprised me. I joked that he was "like a messiah from a fairy tale."

"Yeah, they actually called me 'Messiah.' I didn't feel worthy, so I found it embarrassing," he said, laughing with me.

Then he told me all about the things he'd brought back with him from the other world and photographs he'd taken there. Those surprised me, too.

He'd brought back a dragon scale, armor from the Ackroyd kingdom's army, a specimen of a butterfly native to the other world, and a lap blanket made from a silver wolf, which was a

type of demon.

I told him I'd like them for my research but he said, "No, these are souvenirs. Mom, you can have just the scale," and he handed only the scale to me. The rest, he handed to a bald bodyguard who was nearby.

I kind of... I *really* wanted the other items, too, but for now I was just happy that Kouki had returned safely.

Then I remembered something I'd forgotten. *Although Kouki doesn't know it, over six million armed personnel were mobilized to search for him around the world.*

I contacted Shuuichi to put a stop to that.

While thinking of how to deal with the major nations of the world, I sighed over a worry completely different from the one that had been bothering me just a few minutes ago.

May 22, 2102: After Having Gone Missing in the Incident, Kouki Arakawa Returned Under His Own Power.

Based on secret information from the intelligence departments of various nations, it was believed that Kouki Arakawa traveled to another world using the theory he'd constructed himself, and then returned to us.

Chapter 7: Developing a New Model

Kouki Arakawa's Point of View

It was lunchtime at the academy, and lately I'd been eating with Aikawa, in addition to Saito and Alice.

Aikawa turned to me, as if she was just remembering something, and said, "So when will your research complex be completed, Arakawa?"

What research complex? I've heard nothing about that, I thought, baffled. Anyhow, the only class I have to take at the academy is the ethics class. I don't need a lab to do research.

"I've heard a rumor that some of the labs are going to be underground. That has me curious," Alice added.

Is something going on without me knowing? I wondered.

Feeling concerned, I asked Saito, "Saito, what's this about my having a research complex? No one told me anything."

"Buh hee? I thought the details were sent to everyone's terminals," he replied. "There's a building being built behind the second research complex to give you somewhere to carry out dangerous experiments without causing problems."

I had no idea. I quickly started checking my terminal, but I saw nothing about it in my message history. I asked Saito to forward me a copy, and what I saw written in the message made my head hurt.

Announcement from the Principal to All Enrolled Students

At present, a new research complex is under construction on academy grounds behind the elite high school research complex. There's a high probability that dangerous substances will be stored in the building, and details of the interior therefore won't be published, in the interests of security. For this reason, anyone approaching the construction site without authorization may be detained by security staff.

We expect that this building will be used by academy student Kouki Arakawa after its completion.

Huh? What's with this level of special treatment?! I thought. That reminds me, I did hear a rumor about there being a bald-headed guy wandering around the construction site. I wonder if that could be you-know-who? Though what I really want to know is why I'm the only one who wasn't informed...

I thought hard about it, but couldn't think of an answer.

I guess I'll go talk to the principal about it, I decided.

"Sorry, I'm going to go see the principal," I told everyone. "I probably won't be back here today, so feel free to leave without waiting for me."

Then I hurried to the principal's office.

The principal looked afraid when I entered her office, for some reason.

I couldn't remember doing anything wrong, so I began by asking her a question with a smile.

“What’s the idea behind me having my own research complex? No one told me about it.”

“But I sent the details to a terminal in your home. I even got a reply,” she answered.

She showed me a printout of the message she was talking about. It really was addressed to me, and it was full of details about the research complex. The message had asked whether I had any requests regarding the construction. I couldn’t remember ever seeing this or writing a reply.

Something’s not right here, I thought while checking the address that the reply had been sent from.

The reply had been sent by an “M-Arakawa.”

Who does Mom think she is?! She shouldn’t just reply to messages addressed to her son! I’ll complain to Mom about this when I get home, but this still doesn’t explain why I’m getting special treatment. It hardly makes me happy, and it turns other students against me!

I shared my concerns with the principal.

“You shouldn’t worry about that,” she replied. “We’ve taken it all into consideration. The most important thing is to ensure that dangerous research won’t take place where other students are present.”

I don’t even do any dangerous research... Where’d she get that idea? It’s like she thinks I’m dangerous somehow. I can’t take it. If she says one more word, I’m going to have a breakdown.

I soon gave up and decided to go home to see the real troublemaker: my mom.

“Welcome home, Kou.” Mom welcomed me back with a smile.

Normally I’d have given her a warm response, but not today.

“Mom, about this. Why did you reply to something addressed to me?” I asked, showing her the printout I’d been given by the principal.

“Well, Kou, you don’t know what’s needed for research or what the safety standards are, do you?”

She might be right about that, but I’m pretty sure I don’t need an isolated lab 30 meters underground. They’re even building a radiation room and a low pressure room. I don’t even need a research complex with three stories and a basement in the first place!

Getting a little angry, I made my complaints to Mom.

Mom replied, sounding even angrier than I was: “I can’t believe what I’m hearing! These are just basic safety standards, Kou. Thinking about the safety of other people is part of being a researcher. When you’re researching some virus, you can’t just say, ‘Well as long as I’m immunized against it, there’s no problem.’ The entire building would probably be sealed off if there was an accident! That’s why I made some requests to get the building up to the right standard.”

Why would she assume that I’d be researching anything so dangerous?! Something’s not right. And this is a bit rich considering she does her research in her own room. Is that somehow okay?

I defiantly voiced that question.

“It just so happens that my entire room is lined with lead,” she countered. “If anything goes wrong, it can be sealed off, along with everyone inside.”

It can?! That’s the first mention of that I’ve heard in the fifteen years I’ve been living here!! This conversation had been meant to be about my complaints, but somehow, I had turned out to be the one lacking in common sense, and was coming off worst.

I at least wanted to have some sort of comeback, so I started casting about childishly for something I could retort with. Then I thought of something I knew Mom would have no excuses for.

“I can understand there being a shower room, but why would I need a nap room and a kitchen? Those would just cause hygiene problems,” I said with a triumphant look.

Mom then replied with an even more triumphant look, “You’re right, they might not be necessary. But if you did have these rooms, you could stay overnight in the research complex. And that would mean that whenever your friend Alice spent all night doing research, she’d be happy to be able to use the shower. Maybe she’d even make food in the kitchen. But if you insist they’re not needed, let’s just give those rooms some other function.”

“Mother, please accept my humble apologies. I promise never to engage in such backchat ever again. So, please, don’t change anything. I’m begging you,” I said, falling to my knees, pleading with Mom to not to send the message she’d just started writing.

**

“So that’s how it went,” I finished. “Why do I get treated as if I’m dangerous?”

“Buh hee hee, looks like you have problems, too, Arakawa,” Saito replied.

The next day, I’d arrived early at the academy to share my troubles with Saito across a cafeteria table. As always, I’d just had to explain it to Saito, and he’d understood how I felt. I was feeling grateful to have such a friend when suddenly a thought occurred to me.

“Saito, we’re friends, right?” I asked him.

“Yeah, I’d say so,” Saito replied.

Well, if he feels the same way I do, I’m sure this won’t be problem... Though if he says no to this, I think I might just quit coming to school. Well, here goes nothing.

“In that case, can I call you Shingo? And you can call me Kouki.”

“Buh hee?! You really mean it?”

Of course! I wish I’d said it sooner, but I never found the right moment.

“I just remembered, Ara— ...Kouki. Just before I went home yesterday, the principal asked me to give you the security card for the research complex. You can enter it from today on.” Shingo took the card from his bag and handed it to me.

I started thinking that maybe later we’d all go to see it, and then Alice and Aikawa arrived with perfect timing.

“How about we all go see my research complex a little later?” I asked, “I just got the security card from Shingo, so now we can enter it.”

Shingo and Aikawa were in agreement, but Alice remained silent.

Then she turned to me and said, “It would be nice if we got closer, too.”

What does she mean by that? I wondered.

I told her I didn’t understand, and for some reason that made her get anxious all of a sudden.

“I mean, like you and Saito! I noticed you’re calling him by his first name now....”

Oh, that’s what she meant... With a smile, I called her, “Alice.”

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“So this is Kouki’s research complex? It’s awesome,” Alice said aloud.

Alice wasn’t the only one who was surprised.

What is this? This is just as amazing as the Next-Generation Scientific Research Institute we visited recently, I thought, baffled.

The front entrance had three layers of security, and none of the main rooms inside could be entered without using a retina scanner and vascular scanner. Without thinking, I told everyone that I didn’t know how I could ever make use of the whole thing by myself.

“Well, how about we all use it together?” Shingo asked.

That’s not a bad idea, Shingo. I told him I thought it was a good idea, but I decided to ask the others first to see if they

agreed.

“In that case, I’ll use the third floor,” Aikawa was telling Alice. “Do you want the second floor?”

“Yes. It’s best if there are some sturdy chemical storage shelves for the drug products and suchlike that I use. Saito’s work is the least dangerous, so I think he’d be okay on the first floor.”

I hadn’t asked them anything yet, but the girls had already started allocating rooms for everyone. I guessed from the flow of their conversation that I was going to be in the basement. I looked at Shingo with tears forming in my eyes, but he quickly looked away.

“Shingo, I don’t want to go down in the basement,” I whimpered.

“I can’t help you. Megumi and Alice aren’t going to listen to me, no matter what I say.”

You give up too easily, Shingo! Although I knew that from the start.

“What I wanted to ask was whether we could use the first floor together!” I said.

“Well, I don’t mind, but are you sure you’re okay with that, Kouki? I was planning to bring over some of my ‘friends’ from home,” replied Shingo.

I saw that my fate was sealed. I gave up. There was no way I would ever be able to get along with Shingo’s “friends.”

The room allocations they eventually decided upon meant that Aikawa was given the third floor and the high-speed communications equipment on the roof. Alice was given the second floor and

all of the pharmaceuticals-related equipment. Shingo was given the first floor and the electrical engineering facilities. I was given the isolated laboratory in the basement.

We all took joint responsibility for all of the other facilities, including communal parts such as the nap room and shower room.

Everyone was happily getting ready to move their things from their labs to mine, but it wasn't such a happy time for me. After all, I was the only one who'd be isolated in a seemingly pointless room 30 meters underground.

Just as I was nervously thinking that I might visit Shingo's area after all, Alice timidly said to me, "If you're underground, Kouki, that means we can be alone together without disturbing anyone."

I never thought I'd say it, but being underground doesn't seem so bad!!

**

Miki Arakawa's Point of View

“Yes, I understand. Yes, please do. Goodbye.”

I ended the call feeling a little tired. I'd been talking to a member of Kouki's security staff.

A security squad was constantly on standby within a secret room in the walls of the research complex in case anything happened to him. In addition to protecting Kouki, they would also intervene if he went off the rails and tried to make something extremely dangerous. They'd immediately begin a rescue operation and handle the evacuation if an incident occurred.

Oh... there was one more thing I'd forgotten.

I called the security squad again and asked them to prepare another piece of necessary equipment.

“I'm terribly sorry, but there's one more piece of necessary equipment I forgot to mention. Please ensure you prepare enough CBRNE protective suits for all personnel to protect against chemicals, biological organisms, radioactive materials, nuclear energy, and explosives. I'll be able to provide some myself if you don't have enough.”

The voice on the other end of the call answered with obvious reluctance.

In irritation, I yelled, “It seems you haven't understood how important this is! Are you listening? That boy once used chemical weapons in the garden of his own home. Would you really be foolish enough to enter Kouki's research complex without protective clothing?”

With that, they seemed to understand, and they were quick to

tell me they'd make the necessary preparations before ending the call.

Next up is the principal...

"Is that Ms. Yamamoto? This is Miki Arakawa. Thank you for always taking care of my son."

The principal responded in kind, sounding somewhat flustered.

I said, "If I'm not mistaken, you're forming quite the close relationship with the self-defense forces. It's just... I see. No, I'm not calling to make complaints."

It seemed that she'd mistakenly thought I was angry that she'd dispatched self-defense forces to deal with Kouki. In truth, I was a little annoyed about that, but that wasn't particularly important right now. On the other hand, I hoped she'd forgive me for sounding a little annoyed about it.

"Could you ask the protection squad of the self-defense forces to 'engage using extreme force' in the event of an accident in Kouki's research complex?" I asked. Naturally, I also told her to instruct them to ensure Kouki and his friends were safely extracted first.

The principal seemed to need to give this some thought, but once she understood what I'd meant, she agreed to discuss the matter with the self-defense forces.

All right. Now, no matter what Kouki creates, we should be able to cope with it. As long as he doesn't make nuclear weapons, we should be fine... He wouldn't do that, right? Could something happen to make him think, "Now I'm mad, so I'm going to make nuclear weapons"? I'm really overthinking this. I'm sure he wouldn't make them if it meant violating interna-

tional treaties.

“Hello, Shuuichi? I just wanted to talk about what we’d do if Kouki developed nuclear arms...”

It seemed I wouldn’t get much sleep tonight.

**

Kouki Arakawa's Point of View

“Powered suit development?” I asked.

Shingo and Aikawa both nodded in response.

I don't really get it... Why are they suddenly talking about powered suit development? After waking up early, I'd arrived at my research complex in the academy like always, and then they'd immediately started talking to me about powered suits. I was having a hard time understanding any of it. Not knowing what to say, I turned to Alice for help.

Alice smiled and said, “If the two of you don't start explaining from the beginning, Kouki isn't going to understand.”

To summarize what the two of them told me after being prompted by Alice, they said they wanted to compare the sixth-generation suit that my mom had developed, the space suit I'd worn after being transferred to another world, and the civilian suit made by Quartet Corp that I had for personal use. Then we were going to try combining the advantages of all three in a new model of suit.

“Are we capable of that?” I asked. “We might be able to make adjustments to the powered suits made by research institutions and private corporations, but the suit made by my mom is a tangled web of mysterious technologies.”

“I'm sure we'll manage,” Shingo said. “Electrical engineering is my specialty, after all. Though I would like the blueprints for the sixth-generation suit.”

Now I see. Basically, he wants me to say, “Please, Mom!” Well, I don't think there's any harm in showing them the blue-

prints, I thought, and decided to hand them over.

I told Shingo to wait a while and sent an email asking Mom to send blueprints for the Arakawa model to my personal terminal. Three minutes later, I was reading her response.

“I’ve attached the blueprints just like you asked, Kou. All I ask is that you don’t under any circumstances pick a fight with another nation using some monstrous remodeling of a powered suit.”

Alice read the message over my shoulder, and the way she looked at me afterward hurt a little...

Please don’t look at me as if you’re thinking, “Huh? So you’re that sort of person.” I’ve never done anything like that, and don’t intend to start!!

I deleted the unnecessary message text and forwarded the response to Shingo.

“Buh hee!” he announced. “Now the real work begins.”

While watching Shingo celebrate, I promised myself, *Some-time soon, Mom and I are going to have a serious talk.*

**

After spending several days comparing the three types, we understood why the sixth-generation suit was so easy to operate, why the space suit was so robust, and why the suit made by Quartet Corp felt so good to wear. We had started making a powered suit that combined all of these advantages, but...

“When you control the original Arakawa model, it moves by converting electrical signals inside the brain,” said Shingo with a defeated sigh.

Like Shingo had said, we'd learned that the suit my mom had made was primarily controlled by converting brain signals. In short, the actual controls that the user operated were for nothing more than auxiliary operations.

I'd used the suit to weed the garden one time, but according to Shingo and Alice, "Powered suits were never designed for that kind of delicate operation." The suit my mom had made was designed to only accept *my* brain signals. Put simply, it was an ultrahigh performance suit made just for me.

"So that explains how you were able to use it for delicate things like weeding the garden," said Aikawa, who was just as surprised as everyone else.

"In that case, doesn't that mean it can't be worn by ordinary people?" I asked.

Shingo replied, "Yeah, so why don't we ask Kouki's mom how she made the main piloting module and what method it uses to trace the signals?"

I sent another email to Mom, and after awhile, everyone was looking at the reply on my terminal.

"I've attached the blueprints just as you asked, Kou. The construction itself could be carried out in the academy, but there's a problem. It's impossible for the brain signal tracer to just instantly decode someone's brain signals and then start reading them. The system used in the suit I made does indeed trace Kou's brain signals. But that's the result of me deciphering those signals over the course of several years. There's no quick way to collect that kind of data, so I've also attached a program that ensures the information won't be erased when you remove the control module from the suit you took to the academy. Please input the program before you dismount it, and then use that. Lastly,

today's dinner will be hamburgers."

I didn't know today was hamburgers... I'd better get home. Wait. Forget about that!! Why was she deciphering my brain signals without asking?! She's always doing these things. I'm starting to fear my own mom!

My friends were also looking at me as if to say, *Wow...*

In the end, we decided exactly what work we'd be doing while this strange atmosphere was still hanging over us.

First, we decided to increase the robustness to the utmost limit. This was going to be a one-off unit and nothing more than a prototype, so we were able to overlook the cost.

For the consideration of how it felt to wear it, we put a lot of thought into making the unit as easy to wear as possible, similarly to Quartet Corp's.

For the ease of use, we simply decided to transfer over the module from the sixth-generation suit.

Alice was beside me, smiling and cheering me on: "Let's aim for a seventh-generation unit! Let's go for it, Kouki."

Actually, Alice herself was working hard, too.

Suddenly, a thought occurred to me: *If we're making it so this thing has high durability and can even withstand being in space, shouldn't it be able to fly?*

I tried asking everyone, "Hey, why don't we add thrusters so it can fly?"

They were stunned.

Did I say something funny? I thought it would be cool...

~

Alice Alford's Point of View

“Hey, why don’t we add thrusters so it can fly?”

Just as we were putting together our plans, Kouki suddenly made his suggestion.

So it can fly? Does he understand what he’s saying? I don’t know much about powered suits, but that’s just ridiculous. Just making the orientation control system and the fuel system would be too much work. Doesn’t he understand that?

As I’d expected, Saito raised these same misgivings. “That’s impossible, Kouki. How would you even handle orientation control?”

But Kouki replied, like it was no big deal: “It traces my brain signals, right? So if we add some auxiliary functions for calculating air resistance and midair orientation control, I think the control module would just automatically make the necessary corrections.”

I see, I realized. Ordinary powered suits have automated orientation control because they’re liable to fall over. If we make use of that, it might work out... But that still leaves the problem of how to install the fuel system and extra thrusters. Does he have an idea for that, too?

Megumi asked the same question I was wondering about. “Wouldn’t adding new control modules mean we’d need too many extra batteries as well as the extra fuel for the thrusters?”

“Well, we can just make it bigger. It’s not like it needs to stay the same size.”

It was just as he gave that response that I remembered the

truth about Kouki — the truth I'd forgotten after being around him for so long: He was a genius.

From Kouki's point of view, it was our pessimistic thinking that was hard to understand. We were ordinary people trapped by our own "common sense." Meanwhile, he was a genius who paid common sense no mind while remaining several steps ahead of us.

He was right: If the current size wasn't big enough, we just needed to make it bigger. And yet, the thought hadn't even occurred to us.

Saito became excited, yelling, "That'll work! We might be able to do this."

Meanwhile, I'd been no use at all throughout the discussion, and my own uselessness had me feeling down.

"There's something I need you to do, too, Alice. Do your best," Kouki said to me with a smile.

This is no time to be feeling down, I realized. I decided to put everything I had into doing what I could.

**

Several days later, an extra-large powered suit lay before us. Saito had been in charge of its construction, and now he stood beside Kouki, proudly telling us all about it.

"I finished the final adjustments yesterday after everyone went home! This is the only powered suit in the world capable of solo flight."

Saito continued to enthuse over the powered suit, describing it in detail. Powered suits were generally about three or four meters

tall on average, but this powered suit had a height of eight meters, and thrusters for flying installed in the feet. Much like the sixth-generation suit, it was assembled so that all of the parts could be purged in an emergency. And as an additional feature, it was airtight and robust enough to be used in space—not that it would ever be going into space.

Kouki asked Saito, “If there’s just one, then what generation does this suit belong to?”

“I don’t really know how it’s defined, but sixth-generation models were made by testing brainwave signals, right?” Saito said. “I’m not totally sure, but I think your mom wanted to use that technology to make a remotely controlled model that can adapt to environments such as space. Basically, she wanted to make a remotely-operated, environment-specific seventh-generation suit. What we’ve made is an adaptable flying model that isn’t operated remotely. I suppose you could say it’s an eighth-generation suit.”

Kouki happily cried, “Awesome!!”

But Kouki should have understood that he was the only one who could pilot this powered suit because of its control module.

Saito said what I was thinking. “But Kouki, you’re the only one who can pilot this thing.”

It was cute how that made Kouki a little sad.

Kouki wanted to try wearing the powered suit right away, but first he turned to me and asked, “Alice, did you make the medicine I asked about?”

I opened the bag I’d brought and took out a case containing a disposable syringe. I explained how to use it as I passed the case to him.

Kouki said, “Thank you,” and stroked my hair.

Then he started up the powered suit.

“It’s floating! We did it!! It’s a success,” Kouki said to us through a speaker.

We were marveling at how our suit was floating when suddenly a broadcast was made throughout the academy informing us that there was an emergency.

“Information for all academy students: There has been a collision in the Pacific Ocean involving a large passenger ship and a tanker carrying chemicals. The situation is developing into a major disaster. Twenty minutes ago, the Japanese government announced a state of emergency and requested assistance from the International Science and Technology Academy.

“Students with medical equipment and those with powered suits that can be used in search and rescue operations should gather at the front entrance if they are prepared to participate in the rescue operation. There, they’ll be greeted by the Air Self-Defense Force. A single person could save a large number of lives, so we ask for your cooperation.”

When he heard the announcement, Kouki asked Saito, “Shingo, what’s the maximum flight speed and cruising range for this suit?” Instead of wearing his usual smile, his face looked serious.

Don’t tell me he wants to take it out on a rescue mission! I thought, appalled. *That’s too dangerous! That thing he’s wearing is a prototype. There’s no way he can go out there.*

Saito’s reply was far from what I was thinking: “The maximum speed it can tolerate is 1,600 km/h and the cruising range is 3,200 km. I hate catalog specs, so I’ve given it a full tank of fuel

for the thrusters and plenty of batteries for the main body. But don't raise the output to the maximum. I expect it's fairly powerful, but if it breaks, the suit could be blown to pieces and you with it."

"Well, here I go," said Kouki. "Send the information about the site to my terminal right away. And let the principal know I'm going on ahead."

That was all Kouki said before flying off.

I became angry with Saito and demanded he tell me why he hadn't stopped Kouki.

Saito simply smiled and said, "Kouki's such a kind person that there's no stopping him. Surely, you knew that, too, Alice? Then there's the way he was talking. He always talks like that when serious."

He's right, Kouki is so kind... If I had to say why I loved him, that's the biggest reason. But did he really have to go alone? I'm going to be so angry with him when he comes back, I promised myself before running off to let the principal know.

**



Kaori Yamamoto's Point of View

After making an announcement asking students to help with the rescue operation, I'd been about to make a call to the management of the self-defense forces when I was interrupted by a knock at the door.

Who would disturb me at a time like this?!

I was about to immediately send them away, but then I realized it might be Arakawa, so I invited them in.

"Pardon us," said several voices.

The students who entered were the ones who'd made the cure for the European tragedy. That had caused a lot of trouble because of the barrage of questions we'd been getting from the mass media and pharmaceutical researchers. That was why I'd isolated them... I mean, urged them to use Kouki's research complex.

"Is it something important?" I asked. "I'm incredibly busy right now."

It was a roundabout way of saying, "Please leave."

The student called Alice began speaking as their representative. "Arakawa is heading to the scene to help with the rescue operation. He went wearing a new type of powered suit, and we didn't want it to cause a commotion, so we came to tell you."

When she finished speaking, she showed me some papers containing details about the powered suit.

What on Earth? A powered suit capable of solo flight? And with a cruising range of 3,200 km?! What's more, there was a note saying it was capable of being fitted with weapons. This has

to be a joke. This is no powered suit. This is just a weapon of war...

What would possess him to head out wearing such a thing?!

Just recently, the United Nations had been complaining about the “progress of his ethics training,” and now they were going to be calling me again.

Could it be too late to call him back? I thought frantically.

If I did that and put Arakawa in a bad mood, it would be a problem when he rampaged through the academy. He was unmanageable at the best of times, but if he was using this weapon, that would be the end of the academy.

No, I'd probably die before that. I'll just leave him be, I finally concluded.

“I’ll contact the Marine Self-Defense Force ship responsible for the rescue operation myself,” I said. “Miss Alford, will you and your friends be participating in the operation?”

Aikawa aside, the capabilities of the powered suit that Saito used would be very much appreciated. And Alice had knowledge of medicine that would be necessary when dealing with the wounded. I looked at the students, hoping that they would understand.

“Of course we’ll participate,” Alice responded.

Great. The human rescue operation takes priority; I'll think about the problem of Arakawa later.

I told them to wait in front of the main gate, and returned to making the call.

Kouki Arakawa's Point of View

Acting cool and flying out of the academy to show off in front of Alice had seemed like a good idea, but now I was starting to regret it. The vibrations were awful, probably because I was breaking the sound barrier in human form. I had just injected the strong anti-motion sickness drug that I'd had Alice make, but it wasn't very effective, and I felt like I'd vomit. And the worst part of it...

"I'm scaaaaaaaared!! It's too fast!!"

I'd been sent information telling me that the surface of the sea would be stormy because of a typhoon, and it wasn't wrong. I was flying through the storm with virtually no visibility, and it was terrifying. I cut through the gloom at high speed, currently 1,360 km/h. I felt like everything I'd had for lunch would soon be reappearing thanks to the vibrations and the fear, but I endured the feeling.

"I see it! That must be the ship!" I cried aloud.

As I frantically tried to approach the passenger ship through the storm, a self-defense force rescue ship came into view. Somehow, I could only see one rescue ship.

Don't tell me that's all they've got. I scanned the area with my radar and found nothing except the two ships that had had the accident and the self-defense force ship. *Isn't this, like, really bad?*

For now, I approached the self-defense force ship to tell them I'd arrived to rescue survivors.

"This is Kouki Arakawa. I'm here from the International Sci-

ence and Technology Academy to give some assistance. Please advise.”

“Thank you,” a person on the other end said. “We can’t approach because of the storm. There are currently no injured persons on the tanker, and it’s not at risk of sinking. However, there are many injured persons on the passenger ship, and several tens of those are seriously injured. As a matter of priority, could you help transfer the heavily injured to our ship?”

“Understood,” I said. “I’m taking action. Please treat this frequency band as a dedicated channel for all future transmissions.”

I sent the message and moved towards the passenger ship. There I found many people on the deck waiting for me. I began moving injured people so as to be as gentle as possible, but there were so many...

I can’t handle this alone, I thought before sending a transmission to the self-defense force.

“I’m the only unit here. Have no other rescue ships arrived yet?”

“They’re currently traveling here at top speed. However, they are having difficulties due to the bad weather. The aircraft are likewise unable to descend to sea level because it’s too dangerous.”

I know they’re having a lot of trouble, but they should keep on trying! Well, I guess they’re doing their best, I told myself while performing the same transfer operation over and over again. *There really are a lot of people...* To make matters worse, the passenger ship was flooding, causing it to tilt to one side.

The worst possible prediction ran through my head: *We won’t make it on time.*

I tried to think of some other way, and an idea occurred to me, so I asked the question: “About these aircraft. Suppose they could land and take off somewhere. Would it be possible to rescue people more rapidly?”

“It would be possible.”

I was satisfied by the immediate response from the self-defense force, so I made my decision. When I’d scanned with the radar earlier, there had definitely been an island nearby. I would tow the passenger ship into an inlet of that island.

I remembered what Shingo had said: *“Don’t raise output to the maximum. I expect it’s fairly powerful, but if it breaks, the suit could be blown to pieces and you with it.”* But I was sure it would be fine. Shingo was an incredible genius; what’s more, he was my friend. There was no way my friend would make a powered suit that would kill me. With absolute conviction in my heart, I made an announcement to the self-defense force.

“I’m going to tow the passenger ship into an inlet of the island. Please have the rescue team land there.”

“What? What did you say? I don’t think I’m hearing you right. Sorry, please repeat your message once more.”

“I’m telling you, I’m going to pull the passenger ship into an inlet!” I yelled angrily. “I don’t want to hear you slacking off at a time like this! Just make preparations! Lives are at stake.”

I received an energetic, “U-Understood!”

All right, now I need to send the same message to the passenger ship to let the passengers know...

Once I finished my preparations, I took hold of the passenger ship’s anchor, and had my thrusters fire at full power.

The output climbed to 50%, 55%, 60%, 75%... The output was steadily climbing, but the passenger ship wasn't moving.

I passed 80%, and the fuselage began to vibrate strongly. But the ship still wasn't moving. I passed 90%, and then finally I passed 100%, and it went off the scale like it was no big deal; but the passenger ship didn't move at all.

I lit the reserve thrusters, too, and yelled, "*Move!*"

My prayer must have been heard, because at last the passenger ship began to slowly move. Once it had started to budge just a little, it continued to move under inertia.

I towed the ship into the inlet in a single stroke. I meant to go as far as a beach in the inlet, but the ship was moving with more intensity than I thought, and I realized I had no choice but to completely beach it on the island.

On the bright side, this would make rescue easier. The thought gave me some relief, but suddenly there was a warning alarm from the suit.

"Fire detected in thruster interior" was displayed on the main screen, so I purged the entire fuselage in haste and got out.

As I was tumbling down from somewhere high in the air, wearing just the reinforced exoskeleton, I muttered, "I hope the rescue team gets here soon."

Then I plunged into the sea.

**

Maritime Self-Defense Force, Disaster Rescue Ship Captain's Point of View

As we headed toward the rescue site through bad weather, I received a sudden report from a communications officer.

“We’ve sighted an object flying toward us at high speed from the mainland!”

“Could it be a rescue helicopter from the aerial squad?” I asked.

The response was negative. “There’s no ally identification signal response. And our rescue helicopters can’t break the sound barrier.”

What is it, then? If it’s from the mainland, it can’t be an attack, I thought.

Another communications officer then began reading a report from headquarters. “We’ve received a transmission from the Maritime Self-Defense Force General Staff Headquarters: ‘A powered suit belonging to the International Science and Technology Academy is currently flying toward your present location. Please offer cooperation during the rescue operation.’”

What is he saying? It’s flying? A lone powered suit is flying toward us from the mainland? Ridiculous! That’s not even possible. How would it fly this far? We’re 800 kilometers off the mainland. There must be some kids in General Staff Headquarters who don’t understand the situation and were taken in by some tall tale from an academy student trying to show off.

Then there was a tremendous roar, and the powered suit flew across my line of sight.

“That powered suit. It really is flying,” uttered a crew member in surprise. Every other crewmember was probably thinking the same thing.

We then received a communication from the suit. “This is Kouki Arakawa. I’m here from the International Science and Technology Academy to give some assistance. Please advise.”

Kouki Arakawa... I’d heard in the news that the son of a particular genius had been admitted to the academy, but I’d suspected he was just riding his mother’s coattails. Even a genius would be tempted to use her influence to help the prospects of the son she adored. Geniuses didn’t appear in two consecutive generations... or so I’d always believed. But what was this? The son had surpassed his mother with a level of genius that had allowed him to develop something like a flying powered suit.

“What should we do, Captain?” an officer asked me.

Saving human lives was the priority. I quickly told the officer to give Arakawa instructions.

As I left the crew to take care of the operation, I realized that the suit was moving in exactly the way humans move.

Normally there would be a certain level of time-lag when operating a suit like that, but that wasn’t the case with him at all. The appearance of the suit and the way it moved so gracefully made me imagine a demon wearing armor.

How can it move like that?

I asked my subordinates if any of them knew anything.

“I have a theory, if you’d like to hear it,” said a subordinate who was one of the ship’s powered suit users.

He was a talented and reliable crew member, so I felt that his opinion carried some weight. With that in mind, I urged him to speak, and I couldn't believe what he had to say.

"I suspect it's using a brain signal conversion control module that was installed for experimental purposes in sixth-generation suits. That module was expected to be developed for use in seventh-generation suits. Considering that this suit can fly, I think that would make this an eighth-generation suit. The level of development is 30 years ahead of current technology."

An eighth-generation suit?! Ridiculous! A normal child could never develop such a thing. He's a monster. The boy known as Kouki Arakawa is without a doubt a true monster! I thought.

Then we received another transmission.

"I'm the only unit here. Have no other rescue ships arrived yet?"

An officer quickly responded, "They're currently traveling here at top speed. However, they are having difficulties due to the bad weather. The aircraft are likewise unable to descend to sea level because it's too dangerous."

We would have liked to avoid exposing a child to danger, if possible. We were a professional ocean rescue squad, and we had our pride. But given the circumstances, we had no choice but to rely on a single child. I felt so utterly powerless that I began to grind my teeth, and then a third transmission arrived.

"About these aircraft," it said. "Suppose they could land and take off somewhere. Would it be possible to rescue people more rapidly?"

"It would be possible," an aircraft officer responded instantly. That was another subordinate of mine with a strong sense of re-

sponsibility. Although he'd had no part to play so far, he met the prospect of being useful with enthusiasm.

Still, there was nowhere on the passenger ship for aircraft to land. I didn't know what the boy was planning.

Arakawa announced something that seemed simply impossible. "I'm going to tow the passenger ship into an inlet of the island. Please have the rescue team land there."

What is he saying? He thinks he's going to tow a passenger ship that displaces over 200,000 tons of water? It seemed impossible to me as I heard the transmission, and the officer seemed to feel the same way. Unsurprisingly, he asked Arakawa to repeat his message.

Arakawa's transmissions had been friendly up to now, but this time he was enraged. "I'm telling you, I'm going to pull the passenger ship into an inlet! I don't want to hear you slacking off at a time like this! Just make preparations! Lives are at stake."

His words caused the officer to respond quickly. The officer gave instructions to all other aircraft flying overhead, but they just couldn't accept it.

"There's no way he can tow the ship as far as the island," one of the pilots objected. "Besides, I can't act without approval from my superiors."

The officer spoke back with rage in his voice: "Don't give me that bull! That kid is carrying out the rescue by himself. Aren't you ashamed that we're adults—professionals, even—and we're just watching?! Anyone who doesn't get that should head right back to base and resign!"

When the pilots heard that, they all began flying toward the island as if they'd finally understood exactly what it was they

should be doing.

“Captain, I apologize. I let my emotions get the better of me,” the officer added, looking at me.

“Let’s forget it,” I said. “You were just saying what the rest of the crew were thinking. If anyone’s going to be punished in the coming days, I’ll make sure it’s me.”

Hearing my words, he looked at me, seeming somewhat surprised.

What you’re looking at? I might be a harsh superior, but I do know what’s right. Don’t look at me like I’m some kind of rare animal!

I avoided his glare and watched Kouki’s powered suit begin to act. He was holding the anchor and firing his thrusters. But he wasn’t moving... In fact, I could see smoke pouring from his suit.

This is madness. If he increases the load on his suit, it’ll explode. Just as I grabbed the mic to send him a transmission, I heard his voice and stopped.

“Move!”

His voice came from a line that had been left open. At first it was slow, but I could see the passenger ship was moving now.

He’s actually towing it... I smiled triumphantly, but I still didn’t quite believe it. To see a powered suit achieve such a feat left me lost for words. What I was looking at was an angel.

Despite the bad visibility through the rain, I could see that he was so desperately trying to tow the passenger ship that he’d even fired his reserve thrusters. The flames from his thrusters shone like the wings of an angel. Just moments ago, I’d been thinking

the suit looked like a demon, but now I wanted to punch myself for having thought so.

The angel gradually accelerated, and successfully towed the passenger ship to the island inlet without incident. There were cheers from all crew members on the bridge. This would make the rescue operation go smoothly. I was about to send a transmission to express my admiration to Arakawa himself, when everyone on the bridge froze.

There was fire coming from every part of the suit. It seemed he'd decided to abandon the main body. After purging the whole thing, he'd started falling to the surface of the sea.

I gave instructions to my subordinate rapidly as I watched. "Head to the point where he'll land, ASAP! Don't let that boy die. He did more than anyone for this rescue operation. If we let him die, we'll forever be seen as worthless! Hurry!"

The boy had saved countless lives in our place. It was our turn to save him.

As we made haste toward his location, I promised myself that we would.

**

Kaori Yamamoto's Point of View

Several days after the accident, I received a call from the United Nations. I expected they had more complaints to voice, but to my surprise, it was the complete opposite.

"I should have expected no less, Principal. I take my hat off to your teaching abilities," said the President of the United States as he showered me with praise over the video link.

The Prime Minister of Russia chimed in with, "I agree completely."

I couldn't understand it. "What did I do?"

"You must stop being so humble. The fruits of your ethics training is clear to see: Kouki Arakawa actually put himself in danger to save the lives of others!"

"From the reports I've received, he gave it his all to complete his task even when the powered suit he was wearing burst into flames. The fact he came back uninjured means that world avoided a great loss, and that should be cause for celebration."

I hated to interrupt their celebrations, but the ethics training I'd planned for him hadn't even reached the first stage, because he hadn't been able to attend any lessons yet. But I didn't feel like I could say that given the current atmosphere, so I just went with the flow.

"Of course! I'm confident in my ability to educate. I'm going to continue working hard on his ethics training," I told them.

This was met with responses of, "Magnificent!" "We must think of some bonus to reward the principal," and suchlike. I didn't know what kind of misunderstanding had created this situ-

ation, but I was going to head home soon, drink some wine, and go to sleep.

As I kept myself from facing reality, I stood and wordlessly waited until the meeting was over.

June 18, 2102: A large passenger ship and a tanker carrying chemicals collided in the Pacific Ocean.

There were 560 people wounded in the disaster, but miraculously the incident concluded with no deaths, thanks to the actions of Kouki Arakawa, who hurried to the scene wearing a prototype eighth-generation powered suit.

The components that were purged during his emergency ejection were secretly recovered by British forces, but all of the data was reset the moment the control module was removed. The £300,000,000 spent recovering the components was therefore wasted.

**

Kouki Arakawa's Point of View

Recently, I'd started to think about something constantly. In this world I'd been reincarnated into, military technology had been developing by leaps and bounds. There were even powered suits and space forces. So shouldn't that have made it possible to make a certain device?

Conveniently, Alice and Aikawa were both attending lectures outside of the academy, and couldn't visit the research complex.

With a serious look on my face, I said, "Shingo, we need to talk. This is really important."

I'd started the conversation differently from how I would normally, and Shingo sat up straight and waited for me to continue.

"Shingo, I think I'd like to make optical camouflage," I told him.

Shingo asked me why. He seemed interested in why I would want to make such a thing, and said that if I had any dangerous ideas, he'd have to report me to the principal.

I could have given him some excuse to hide my true intentions... but if I tricked my friend and hid the truth from him to make optical camouflage, I was sure a day would come when I'd regret it. I knew that in my heart, and so I looked Shingo straight in the eye and told him precisely what I was intending.

"I want to peep on Alice while she's showering," I told him.

It was clear from Shingo's face that he was shocked, but just as he was about to say something, I put up my hand to silence him. I had more to say, and it was crucial for Shingo to hear me out.

“You know there’s a shower room here in my research complex, right? Well, Aikawa uses this research complex, too.”

The more I talked, the more interested Shingo became. I started feeling more relaxed, and continued talking while drinking my tea.

“Supposing Aikawa did use the shower. Would you be able to wait patiently, Shingo? You’re bound to start thinking, ‘I want to peep.’ But you’d be afraid that you’d be caught if you did. What you need at a time like that is optical camouflage.

“Now that you’ve heard what I have to say, I don’t mind if you refuse to cooperate for ethical reasons. I wouldn’t blame you for that. But if possible, I’d like you to keep this discussion a secret. I intend to start making it by myself.”

After I’d explained everything, I returned my teacup to the table and turned to face Shingo. Looking back at me was the manly face of my friend— no, my comrade.

“Buh hee! Of course I’ll help! Why wouldn’t I?” Shingo replied passionately.

Thus began our “Stealth Camouflage Development Project.”

**

Miki Arakawa's Point of View

“I have an urgent report.”

I was in my room compiling a research report when I received a call from one of Kouki's security officers and one of Shuuichi's intelligence officers who had been studying the information on Kouki's personal terminal.

What has my boy done this time? I wondered.

The intelligence officer began to explain: “A few days ago we found that Kouki's personal terminal was being used much more frequently than usual. We investigated the cause and found something in a protected folder. I'll forward it to you.”

The folder forwarded to my terminal was named “Secret Project.” I already had nothing but bad feelings, but I checked the contents.

“Optical camouflage development project: The objective is to develop optical camouflage that can be used by an individual. The minimum performance requirements are noise cancellation, waterproofing, and the ability to continuously operate for more than 30 minutes. As an additional objective, we aim to make it mountable to a powered suit so that it can be used outdoors.”

Exactly which country does my son intend to start a war with? I wondered. I'd thought the same thing about the eighth-generation suit he'd made previously. And the AI-equipped work robot that I'd helped with, too. When I thought about it rationally, I could only imagine this was preparation for an intense war.

Large countries like the United States aside, he was capable of

bringing down a small nation by himself without breaking a sweat.

I gave them both instructions while imagining the worst-case scenario: “I’ll make a decision on this matter after discussing it with the higher-ups and my husband. Until then, please refrain from doing anything other than monitoring him. If you provoke Kouki carelessly, your lives could be in danger.”

With that, I ended the call and immediately made a call to Shuuichi’s terminal. I was connected to Shuuichi quickly, and I forwarded him the folder. Our discussion quickly had him scratching his head in confusion.

“What’s he going to do with a thing like that?” Shuuichi asked.

In the end, we decided that he’d recently gotten interested in a girl and was unlikely to try anything dangerous anytime soon; but we wanted to continue keeping him under heavy surveillance.

**

Several days later, we received an urgent message from the special squad that was monitoring Kouki.

“Kouki and his friend have conducted a trial run of the prototype optical camouflage, and the trial was a success. It was still detected by our infrared detectors, but to the naked eye, it completely disappeared. It remained completely invisible for 20 minutes.”

“Understood. Is there anything else to report?” I asked.

It seemed the boys had made prototypes of several insect-shaped scouting robots equipped with optical camouflage that made them invisible for just several minutes.

This was a problem. I wouldn't be able to protect him if he was so blatantly preparing for war.

Exactly which country is he planning to declare war on?

Just as I began attempting to identify which ill-fated nation it was, I received a report that made my heart stop.

“This is an emergency! Kouki has mobilized his scouting robots against the academy. He has already begun to act.”

We're too late...

I didn't know what he intended to do with those scouting robots, but the academy would become hell on Earth. I regretted not understanding my own child's feelings better.

I gave my next instructions through gritted teeth: “Please relay the image of my son to me. If I can understand what he's attempting, I'll know how to proceed. Please also instruct the self-defense forces to mobilize. Please instruct them to evacuate the students.”

The image and voice of Kouki then came to me through my terminal.

Please, at least refrain from killing any of the students at your academy, I prayed.

Kouki said, “Ms. Roberta is the adviser for the swimming club, right?”

The voice of Saito, who was sitting beside Kouki, reached me. “Buh hee, you're right. Right now she should be in the changing room. Kogane Beetle #1 should be able to enter through a gap in the ventilation fan.”

I noticed that Kouki was operating the controls while Saito spoke.

“Infiltration successful!” Kouki cried.

“Well, Kouki? Can you see any boobs?”

“Don’t get impatient. If she sees it, she’ll stomp on it. This thing just looks like an insect.”

I could tell they were excited.

What’s this about? Wasn’t it a weapons test? I thought to myself, confused. Meanwhile, they were saying things like “Ms. Roberta’s are so big,” in excited voices.

There was no mistaking it— My idiot son and his friend had gone to extremes for the sake of peeping.

I felt dizzy as I sent my next transmission to the observation squad: “That’s enough. Please withdraw. And notify the defense forces that our information was incorrect.” Then I ended the call.

I spent a long time deliberating whether I should be pleased that my son was developing normally, or whether I should scold him for peeping.

**

Kouki Arakawa's Point of View

There was something I'd been constantly thinking about since last night.

I didn't know why Mom had said the things she had, but I had no choice but to accept them as fact. It was really tough, but I couldn't remember ever going wrong by listening to my mom's advice.

So despite my reluctance, with a serious look on my face, I said to Shingo, "Shingo, we need to talk. This is really important."

I'd started the conversation differently from how I would normally, and Shingo sat up straight and waited for me to continue.

"My mom found out about us peeping."

"Whaaat?! How?!"

How should I know?! You tell me.

I'd been eating dinner as normal last night, when suddenly she'd smiled and said, "Kou, I know how interesting it must be for you, but peeping is never okay. Alice would hate you if she found out, wouldn't she? No doubt about it."

Where did she get that information? I'd wondered. It scares me...

I told Shingo the whole story, and waited for his response.

"Buh hee. Then what happened to our completed optical camouflage?"

"It's installed on my powered suit, so the next time you pub-

lish your research, you can go ahead and include it.”

I didn’t really have any use for research reports in my name. I figured I’d let him have it in the spirit of generosity between comrades.

Next time something happens, this should smooth cooperation between us, I cunningly thought to myself.

“What happened to the photograph? The one of Ms. Roberta,” Shingo asked quietly.

“Well, obviously, I’ve it saved on my terminal and put the strongest possible protection on it!!” I cried.

Shingo responded with a thumbs-up and a smile. His face was the face of a comrade.

Chapter 8: A New Family Member

Kouki Arakawa's Point of View

"Mom, I'm home," I called.

That evening, I'd returned home from the academy as normal to find Mom in the kitchen preparing dinner.

Judging from the smell, it's stew today.

I went to my room to change my clothes, and then I went to talk to Mom again.

"Mom, I'm hungry."

"It'll be done soon, so just sit down and wait," she replied.

"Kon, kon!"

When I urged dinner along, it seemed to bother Mom, and she made me sit down and wait quietly. After I'd waited for a while, Mom brought dinner over to the table, and we ate it together. Ever since I'd been admitted to the academy, we'd made it a rule that during dinner, I'd talk about what had happened at the academy and anything that had left a big impression on me, and I'd listen to Mom talk about her research.

"Oh, really? That's interesting," said Mom.

"Kon."

"Yep, Aikawa was all over Shingo again today," I replied.

After I'd finished eating, I took a bath and then returned to my room. That was when I noticed I'd missed a call from Alice.

It's unusual for her to call at this time... I thought before calling her back.

"Kouki, sorry about this, but tomorrow..." she began.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Kon..."

She was going to be doing pharmaceutical research in my research complex the next day, so she wanted me to contact her using her personal terminal first if I was going to go up to the second floor.

That reminds me, I thought. When Shingo went to the second floor to fetch a drug without asking, the powdered drug product that Alice was making was blown onto the floor. That was a lot of trouble. I'll have to warn everyone.

"Okay, got it," I said.

Alice added, "By the way, I keep hearing something making a 'kon' sound. What is that?"

"Oh, this? This dragon was just here when I got home," I answered, taking another look at the dragon in front of me.

I could tell Alice was speechless.

It's fine, Alice. When I got home and saw this thing, I didn't know how to react either, so I've been ignoring it, I thought.

"I think I must be a little tired, so I'm going to bed early," Alice said before ending the call.

I guess that's a normal reaction. Anyway, what even is this thing? It must be some strange creature that Mom made...

“Hey,” I called out to it.

“Kon?” it responded, as if it understood what I was saying.

I said nothing.

The dragon tilted its head as if to say, “What is it?” It seemed to be waiting for me to speak.

I poked its face with my finger.

“Kon! Kon kon!”

It didn't seem to like that. It snapped angrily at the tip of my finger, but that didn't hurt me at all. It was only about 20 cm long, after all.

It looked like the kind of dragon that would appear in a fantasy story world, except that it was a miniature version. Even its wings were fully-formed.

A thought occurred to me.

“Hey, can you fly?” I asked it.

“Kon...”

It flapped its wings up and down in a cute little motion as if to tell me it wasn't possible.

What about that other thing dragons do?

“Do you have fire or ice breath or anything like that?”

“Kon...”

It seemed it couldn't breathe fire or anything.

"What kind of dragon are you?" I asked it, and it responded by puffing out its chest.

If you can't fly and you can't breathe fire, you're just a plain old lizard! But wait... You're a lizard that understands speech.

"Think I'd get a good price for you?" I asked.

"K-Kon?!"

I was only joking about selling it, but I had to find out more about where it came from. I didn't doubt for a second that Mom was responsible for this strange creature being in our house.

At this time of day, she's probably doing research in her room, I thought.

I went to Mom's room and knocked on the door, but there was no response. *Could she be in the library in the basement?*

I went down into the basement, and there was Mom, drawing a magic circle on the floor for some reason.

Huh? What?! No way! Mom summoned this thing?!

I called out to her, and she quickly closed the book she was reading—it looked like it was full of dark magic—and turned to face me.

"Kou?! Is something wrong?"

"Is something wrong"? That's what I want to ask you!

Up till now, I'd thought she was a genius scientist. It was a bit of a letdown to know she was doing this sort of thing on the side. I told her so, though in a more roundabout sort of way, and she

was quick to deny it.

“That’s not what this is! I didn’t think a baby dragon would just suddenly hatch out of it. I was working in my lab as normal when it suddenly hatched from the scale you gave me earlier. I’m sure you can understand why I’m now starting to think magic might actually exist after seeing something like that.”

I don’t understand at all, but what’s this about something hatching from the scale? When they gave it to me, they told me it was a legendary elder dragon scale... Did Mom make a clone of it? I wondered.

“After you gave it to me, I used it to decorate a shelf in my work area. I was working when it suddenly cracked open, and this little creature came out.”

While talking, she took the dragon that was standing by her feet into her arms and looked at me.

It came from a scale? Am I the only one who thinks that’s weird?! I pressed Mom for more information, and she told me her thoughts.

“Kou, when you were telling me about the other world, you mentioned there were demons there, right? You told me that you’d heard it was difficult for humans to defeat dragons. So how would the people there know it was a scale?”

Well, that was the legend that was passed down, wasn’t it? It didn’t even look anything like an egg. It had to be a scale.

Mom continued her explanation: “I think it probably wasn’t a scale. It was an egg or something similar. I suspect it’d become dormant, and that made it seem dead. Even in our world, there are creatures that lie dormant for several years or even several decades in the same way. If their world has unbelievable tech-

nologies like magic, it's not so hard to believe something could remain dormant for hundreds of years."

I hated to admit it, but what she was saying made sense. "But if you're right, then why did it wait until now to hatch?"

"Kou, a lot of people all had to use something you called magic power at the same time to return you to this world, right? Perhaps that was the trigger that woke it up?"

So I'm the one responsible... I thought, looking at the dragon cradled in Mom's arms. Sorry about all this. This world really isn't where you belong.

"It's harmless right now, so let's take care of it here at home," Mom said. "It's a dragon that will live for several hundreds of years, so it should take some time to grow up. Let's make sure we find a way to return it to its home world before then." With a smile, she added, "Given how it looks, it could pass for a rare lizard."

I'd better talk to my friends at the academy about this tomorrow, I decided, and returned to my room.

**

"So cute!!" cried Alice.

"Can you breathe fire?" Aikawa asked it.

The next day, I'd brought the dragon with me to my research complex, and Alice and Aikawa had taken to it immediately. I stood with Shingo watching the spectacle, and all I could do was smile wryly at their reactions. *It's a dragon! At least be a little surprised!*

"Kouki, have you given it a name?" Shingo asked me.

I hadn't thought to give it one. *What would be a good name...?* I looked over at the dragon, and when it noticed me looking at it, it let out a cry and came over. It looked surprisingly cute as it rubbed its face against my hand.

"Kouki, let's all come up with a name together," said Alice.

"Sure. Let's decide together," I replied.

I figured I couldn't go on forever just saying "Hey!" and "Dragon," so I agreed with the idea. Somehow, it wasn't until that moment that I discovered what terrible taste everyone had.

"Buh hee! I like the sound of 'Phantom Nocturna,'" suggested Shingo.

Remind me how old you are, Shingo.

"No way, Shin. Let's call it 'Rose Weldey.'"

Aikawa, what kind of name is Weldey?

Alice had been looking at the dragon intently the whole time. She turned to me and suggested a name: "Kouki, I like the name 'Knight Clayde, the Silver.'"

Not you, too?! It's not even a knight! It's just some freaky lizard!

The dragon had been quietly making unhappy "kon..." sounds the whole time.

"How about we name him 'Kon'?" I suggested.

"Kon! Konkon!!" the dragon replied happily to my suggestion.

Well that settles it. If it likes the name, then from today onwards, it'll be known as Kon. Everyone else was making jeering

noises in disapproval, but I paid them no mind. *I'm not calling out the name "Nocturna" when there are people around!*

Aikawa started loudly complaining: "The problem is that it's making cute 'kon' sounds! What kind of dragon does that? If it would just make more dragon-like sounds, 'Rose' would be a perfect fit."

I tried asking Kon, "Can you make any other noises?"

Kon climbed down from the table and walked to the edge of the room. Then he turned to us, and took a deep breath...

"Graaaaaaaaaaw!!"

It certainly wasn't the cry we'd heard from him up to now. It was a genuine roar. He looked over to me and puffed out his chest as if to say, "Good enough for you?" Aikawa was staring at him in amazement.

"I think I'm okay with 'Kon,'" said Alice. Apparently she really wanted it to go back to making the "kon" sound.

I promised myself I'd make Aikawa sweep up the cup that'd been shattered from the shock of his roar. It had been all her fault, after all.

**

"Kouki, will you come with us on a test of courage?" Aikawa suddenly asked me while I was cleaning up the cup that had been shattered by Kon's roar.

I looked at Aikawa as if to say, "Are you feeling tired?"

She became flustered and denied it. "I-It's not like that! Of course I don't actually believe in ghosts. I just want to investigate

the seven wonders of the academy.”

I'll bet they're just clichéd rumors... Why should I have to figure out seven wonders after getting into this kind of academy? And it's only June! This is the kind of thing you'd normally get excited over in August when it's the height of summer. You can't seriously be arranging a test of courage at this time of year.

“That sounds good to me,” said Alice. I thought she'd be the most set against it, but Alice was agreeing enthusiastically.

I glanced sideways at Shingo, and he shook his head in resignation.

Looks like I'm about to get dragged into this... I thought. Lately, it seemed as though I was getting dragged into everything that happened around me, and it was a real pain, so I wanted to refuse for once. With that decision in mind, I was about to tell Alice, “I think I'll pass,” but she spoke before I could.

“Aren't you coming with us, Kouki?”

Those teary eyes of hers were really putting the pressure on me.

What a dirty trick. She knows I can't refuse now.

In the end, I broke down as always, and had to go with them.

“So what's the story behind the seven wonders, Aikawa?” I asked.

Whatever the story is, I'm sure it's just something exaggerated that got blown out of proportion. When I hear more about it, it'll probably be something easily explained... I thought to myself before allowing Aikawa to explain the details.

Aikawa began to explain in an unusually quiet voice, as if she was afraid of something.

“First, there’s the story of the sakura tree with petals that never wilt. There’s a sakura tree in the courtyard that continues to blossom, even after the other trees have lost their flowers already; and then, after some time, all of its petals suddenly scatter at once.

“Second is the basement of the medical research complex. Every night, you can hear a boy screaming.

“Third is the mystery of the gym shed. When night falls, a pale figure appears, peering through a slightly open window of the gym shed of the sports club near the middle school.”

Well, I can explain every one of these stories so far, I thought. I asked Aikawa for a few more details, and then urged her to continue when I was satisfied with her responses.

“Fourth is the dancing shadow. The dancing shadow appears on the third floor of the pharmaceutical research complex when there’s no one around.

“Fifth is the clock tower guard. The instant the clock reaches 9 PM, you’ll face the wrath of the guard if you’re inside the clock tower.

“Sixth is the disappearance at the main gate. The story goes that if you go home from the academy at night, when you walk toward the main gate, an academy student ahead of you will vanish in an instant. The seventh...”

Aikawa became quiet when she reached the seventh rumor, and everyone pressed her to hurry up and continue. But Aikawa just looked at us and said, “I don’t know it.”

At the sound of those words, we all collapsed in a heap. Even Kon must have been angry because he was sinking his teeth into Aikawa's foot.

"If you don't know of a seventh wonder, then why not call them the six wonders?!" I complained, and Aikawa got angry at me for some reason.

"The fact I don't know what the seventh wonder is is a wonder in itself!"

Okay, whatever. I know the stories now, and I've figured out a likely explanation for each, so now I'll just explain them one at a time.

"Well I've got my theories, but what about everyone else? Should we go to each site and try to find the explanation?" I suggested to everyone.

We decided we'd all go to find the truth behind each story.

This is a pain, but it's the only way. First I'd better grab this and that... I'd better have that tool with me, too, I decided. I figured out which tools I'd need to take.

Meanwhile, Aikawa was whispering something to Shingo. "Shin, I'm scared. Will you hold my hand?"

"Buh hee?!"

You two are just looking for an excuse to mess around with each other! Damn! I'm so jealous!! I couldn't say what I was thinking, but I gave Shingo a look that was intense enough to kill.

Alice must have noticed. She laughed and told me, "We can hold hands, too."

I'd almost forgotten how cute Alice is...

* *

“We have to think about timing, so let’s start with the second story about the medical research complex,” I said to everyone, since it was still light outside. Everyone came along without showing any fear.

“I heard there’s a morgue down in the basement,” said Shingo, who now seemed to be getting cold feet. If I’d guessed right, we’d find something unusual there.

“Aikawa, I know you just told me this, but the teaching staff have no reason to visit this building, right?”

“Yes, it’s left up to the students to manage the building.”

Well that just about settles it... I thought as we arrived at the basement entrance where the screams had been heard. Feeling a little playful, I told Shingo to go open the door. Shingo seemed scared, so I told him, “Don’t you want to show your girlfriend how brave you are?”

That seemed to convince him.

“Buh hee! I’m opening it,” he said before bravely throwing the door open.

The door opened, and before our eyes... there was a mahjong table.

It was exactly what I’d expected to see, and I pumped my fists in celebration. On the other hand, Shingo and Alice were standing there with blank looks on their faces, so I decided I should explain it to them.

“This is a research building of the elite high school where no teaching staff go, so if any guys wanted to gather and play mahjong, this would be the place. If no one comes here because of the ghost stories, then that just makes it even better. I suspect the screams come from whoever loses the game.”

“That’s all?” asked Alice in surprise.

“That’s just how ghost stories are,” I said.

She smiled and agreed.

Next up... What time is it? Where we head next depends on the time of day, I thought.

I was about to check the time on my terminal, but Shingo guessed what I was thinking and told me, “It’s 4:30 PM.”

What a great friend! I shot Shingo an appreciative look.

“Shin, you’re wearing your watch on the opposite arm today,” said Aikawa, as if she’d just noticed something very strange.

Shingo must have just felt like wearing it on the other arm for a change. I do the same thing. I wear my terminal on different arms from day-to-day. Anyway, he said 4 PM... That means the third story is next.

We arrived at the third-floor terrace of the gym used by the sports club at the edge of the academy grounds. From here, we had a good view of the rear side of the gym shed. I looked through the binoculars I’d brought, and I could see the window slowly opening.

“I knew it,” I mumbled to myself.

Aikawa grabbed the binoculars to get a better look at the gym

shed. There was anger in her voice as she said: “Is he standing there smoking?!”

That’s right... Just as Aikawa said, a middle school student was there smoking a cigarette. Everyone wants to look tough at that age, so I understood how he felt, but he’d chosen the worst place for it. If he wasn’t careful, he could set the place on fire, so I thought we should warn him. Aikawa had other ideas, and she immediately sent an email to the school counselor using her terminal.

We watched for a while, and eventually we could tell that the teacher had come running into the gym shed.

Looks like we put him in a tough spot.

“Well, it’s dangerous. And it’s against the law.” Aikawa’s anger still hadn’t subsided.

I watched Shingo try to calm her down while he decided which location to guide everyone to next.

Next, we arrived at the botanical labs of the academy. I was sure that this was the place that managed the sakura trees in the courtyard. Alice was nodding as if she had it figured out, so I told her to go ask one of the researchers about the courtyard’s mysterious sakura tree.

“That sakura tree in the courtyard?” the researcher said. “That’s a tree we selectively bred to have a long flowering time. It’s not quite perfect. It scatters all of its petals in one night, and that’s something we’d like to fix.”

That male researcher gave a straightforward and honest answer to Alice’s question. I felt as though everyone was losing enthusiasm each time we found that one of the seven mysteries could be easily solved.

Honestly, this whole thing is going way too predictably, and now I just want to go home! I thought, sighing. One of my favorite animal documentaries would be on TV today at 6 PM, and I wanted to go home right away to watch it. *Can't we quit this now?*

I tried asking everyone. "Are we going to keep going with this? I think the truth behind all of the other stories is going to be just as much of a letdown."

"I want to understand them all, no matter what!" insisted Aikawa.

"Kon! Kon!" Surprisingly, even Kon was urging me to continue.

Shingo and Alice both said, "Well, we've gotten this far," as if they were just continuing under inertia.

I sighed and led everyone to the next location. I knew that we'd be able to see the pharmaceutical research complex from the second floor of this building. We all looked out on the pharmaceutical research complex, and Kon began sniffing as if he'd noticed something.

"Someone is dancing?" Alice asked, noticing that there was a human figure in a room at the end of the pharmaceutical research building.

I was looking at that room, too, but even though I was seeing just what I expected, it was still disappointing. This was the kind of thing I could see at any time in my own research complex.

"He's just airing out the place," I said. "You always do the same thing in your lab before you leave, right, Alice? You use a fan or something to blow bad smells outside. Unlike Alice, this guy moves around like an idiot, so it looks like he's dancing. The

reason it happens when ‘there’s no one around’ is because it’s something he does before going home. He’s the only person there.”

“I wonder if the way I move looks stupid to anyone who sees me from outside...” whispered Alice, seeming a little concerned.

Not letting her distract me, I headed toward the clock tower to investigate the fifth rumor.

**

“Let’s see... it’s 6:50 PM right now, so we’re right on time,” I said.

Shingo gave me a suspicious look, and asked, “Kouki, didn’t the story say it happens at 9 PM?”

I just laughed and didn’t answer him. I poured some water into a glass that I’d brought and walked over to place it inside the clock tower before returning. Then I turned to everyone.

“The clock tower’s bell will chime in three minutes, so you’d better cover your ears. Kon, why don’t you curl up inside my bag for a moment?”

Everyone covered their ears as I’d instructed, and Kon happily curled up inside my bag. Then we heard the bells begin to chime the hour. It was rather loud.

I can’t believe how stupidly loud this is! To think, I was originally planning to go stand inside there! Putting a glass in there instead was the right idea.

When the bells stopped, I opened the door to the clock tower to show the glass I’d placed inside.

“Kon?!” I could tell that Kon was shocked. *Well I guess he has only just been born. I can't exactly expect him to understand why the glass broke.*

No one else seemed to understand either, so I gave them a simple explanation.

“It's the oscillations from the sound,” I told them. “That's the guard's true form. When Kon roared in the lab a while ago, you all saw the cup on the table shatter, right? It's the same thing. If someone stood inside there while the bell was ringing, I expect they'd fall over with a concussion. Sonic grenades work on the same principle.”

Everyone accepted my explanation with a nod.

All right, there's just the mystery of the main gate, and then we're finished! If we finish this up, I can go home. The idea of being released from this troublesome task made me so happy that I walked with a spring in my step all the way to the main gate.

When we arrived at the main gate, I asked everyone to wait while I thought about the location.

I think that place over there might work, but I can't be sure. If I mess this up, we'll be stuck waiting for another car to arrive, I thought. Just at that moment, a car appeared from inside the academy! *Perfect timing. And there's another one approaching from the road, too.*

I spoke loudly so that everyone waiting would hear. “Blink and you'll miss it, so watch closely!”

The headlights of the cars overlapped, centered on the spot where I was standing.

Did I pull it off? I apprehensively turned to face everyone.

“He disappeared!” they cried.

Looks like it was a success.

Once the car had passed, Shingo came running toward me. “Buh hee! What was that? What just happened?”

“It’s the effect of the glare from the headlights,” I explained. “Anything located at a point where two car headlights overlap at night will seem to disappear. It’s dangerous, and it causes a lot of accidents. What probably happens is that the person in the headlights leaves through the gate and turns the corner, so they leave your field of view. Then you might make the mistake of thinking that they’ve truly disappeared.” I felt a little proud of myself.

Everyone nodded appreciatively.

In the end, every story had turned out to be just a big deal made out of nothing.

When something a little mysterious happens, the news spreads quickly, I reflected. I realize it’s all good fun, but I hate getting mixed up in it.

Just then, another car emerged from within the academy grounds and stopped in front of me. The driver lowered the window, and spoke to me. “Oh? Is that you, Arakawa? What are you doing out here? I thought you had a car taking you home.”

The principal was gazing at me through the window. I told her what we’d been doing, and she responded bluntly while smiling. “I see. But you know, it’s getting late, so head on home. Are Saito, Aikawa, and Miss Alford with you? It’s time you all went home and had dinner.”

We watched the principal leave, and then we all headed home.

As I was returning home to eat dinner, I received a message on my personal terminal.

I skipped over the nagging emails I'd been getting from Mom ("Kou, I'm serving dinner!") and opened Shingo's email.

Shingo's email read, "Sorry that I had to leave halfway through, Kouki! Did you explain all of the seven wonders in the end?"

What does he mean? He was with us the whole time. I asked him for an explanation, and he soon replied. I read his email and was frozen in shock.

"What do you mean? I had to leave soon after we saw the mahjong table because I had somewhere else to be. After you explained the sakura tree in the courtyard, Megumi and Alice sent me a message to say they'd both gone home. I heard you went on alone to check out the pharmaceutical research complex because you were curious. Was that wrong?"

So who (or what) was with me today?

Kaori Yamamoto's Point of View

I held back a laugh while driving. It turned out that even Arakawa had a childish side. I couldn't believe it that he'd told me with a straight face that he was investigating the seven wonders, even though there were "actually only six of them." He seemed to be under some misunderstanding, because there certainly were seven wonders.

I'd heard the story from students when I'd taken up the position as principal, and I remembered the story involved an "imitating mirror." The story said that if you passed before a certain mirror in the academy, something would appear, disguised as someone you know, to play tricks on you. It was the childish kind of story that children would often make up for fun.

"But I wonder..." I said thoughtfully. "I wonder... If Arakawa was by himself in front of the main gate, then where had his friends gone?"

I wonder if everyone had hidden themselves after being surprised to see me, I thought to myself as I drove on toward home.

Interlude: A Date

Kouki Arakawa's Point of View

"I'm so bored..." I murmured.

I didn't really have anything to do, so I'd been lazily lying on my bed, absentmindedly sorting data on my personal terminal. After getting all of the files neatly sorted into categories, an alert telling me I had an email appeared on my terminal screen, and I opened it.

From: Alice

Kouki, are you sleeping yet? Do you want to go somewhere on Saturday if you're free?

This is... No way. Is she inviting me on a date?! Wait. She'll probably invite Shingo and Aikawa, too... I might regret getting my hopes up, so I took a moment to collect myself. Right now, I don't know what Alice has in mind. I guess I should reply? Actually, no. I'll understand her better if I hear her voice directly.

Holding my excitement inside, I made a call to Alice's terminal.

"H-Hello? Kouki?" she cried.

She answered! Judging from the sound of her voice, Alice was as tense as I was. This was definitely a date.

"Yeah, it's me," I said. "I just saw your email. Do you want it to be just the two of us?"

“Um, yeah.... If you’re okay with that.”

I’m more than okay with it! I need to play this cool and not seem overeager... If I seem too excited, she’s going to think, “This guy is so desperate. How gross.” I have to keep my cool no matter what.

“I don’t mind at all. Did you have a place in mind? If there’s somewhere you want to go, anywhere is fine with me.”

Nailed it! I played it cool and was kind enough to let her choose the place without making a big deal of it! I’m bound to have scored some points with her.

“I wonder where we should go...” Through the terminal, Alice sounded happy as she thought it over. “Oh, I know. Let’s go to that aquarium! I saw on TV recently that you can touch penguins and dolphins there. Do you know what the name of the place is?”

“You mean the Ocean Research Center, the Blue Aquarium?” I replied.

“Yes! You must have been watching the same program. I’d really love to pet a dolphin. They said it was popular on TV, but do you think we could get tickets to the dolphin show?”

“I think so,” I said. “How about we meet at the front entrance to the Blue Aquarium at 9 AM tomorrow?”

“All right! I’ll see you there. Look forward to it. And don’t be late. Good night.”

I replied, “Good night,” and ended the call with Alice.

The Blue Aquarium? I think that place has been popular with couples and families ever since it started being shown on TV recently. I’d heard that the show tickets for every time slot com-

pletely sold out every day before the morning was over.

I hadn't actually watched the show Alice mentioned; I'd been watching another documentary about owls that aired on another station at the same time. *So why do I know so much about Blue Aquarium?* I wondered.

As soon as the call with Alice was over, I began looking at web-pages on my terminal screen. I found a page that was for the Ocean Research Center rather than the aquarium, and I clicked a link on the page that lead to a list of researchers.

"Special research adviser... Miki Arakawa."

Now I remember... I heard about the aquarium's popularity from Mom. I looked over at my desk and saw there were two tickets lying on the desk. Those were the "Blue Aquarium Premium VIP" tickets Mom had given me after telling me about the aquarium. With these tickets, I wouldn't even need to line up and buy show tickets!

"Mwahahaa! It's too perfect! What were the chances of Alice wanting to go to the same aquarium? This is certain victory!" I cried.

With the success of tomorrow's date all but certain, I went to bed feeling content, and I soon fell asleep.

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The next day, I arrived at the entrance to the aquarium 20 minutes before the time we'd agreed. There, I found Alice was already waiting for me. It might not have been intentional, but leaving a girl waiting on our first date was unforgivable, so I hurried toward her while calling her name.

"I'm sorry. Did I make you wait?" I asked her.

“Not at all,” she replied. “I only just got here, so don’t worry about it. I’m really looking forward to this. Let’s go buy our tickets.”

“I already have our tickets, so don’t worry about that. I’m going to go collect our passes before the gate opens. Do you mind waiting here?”

“Ah, okay...” replied Alice, cutely tilting her head as if curious.

I smiled at her before running off to the VIP ticket window. At the window, I said to the lady behind the counter, “Excuse me, I’d like to redeem this ticket.”

“I’m sorry,” she replied. “This window is for VIP tickets only. Regular customers need to use the window over there.” She knitted her brow and gestured towards the ordinary ticket window.

That makes sense... I thought. I just look like a school kid. She wouldn’t expect me to be able to afford a VIP ticket when they’re so expensive. Especially since the recent popularity has made them hard to get a hold of.

I was sure she hadn’t intended to look down on me, so I took a VIP ticket from my pocket and politely handed it to her while trying to be as friendly as possible. “I think I’m at the right window. This is a VIP ticket, isn’t it?”

The lady quickly began apologizing. “I’m so sorry! Could you please show me some ID?”

I handed over my academy student registration card, and the lady became wide-eyed as she looked at it. Then she looked back and forth between my face and a terminal that I guessed was showing my face. Finally, she spoke in a trembling voice, “Oh... Kouki Arakawa... himself...?”

“Right. That’s me,” I replied.

Huh? My mom might be an adviser to this research center, but why would the ticket staff care so much about some big-name research adviser?

She immediately answered my unspoken question. “I saw it all in the news! You’re the one who developed the cure for the European tragedy, right?! That’s incredible! Are you by yourself? If you like, I could be your guide.”

“Thank you, but I’m here with a friend, so I’ll have to refuse your kind offer,” I said. “More importantly, if you’re done confirming my identity, could I get my passes now?”

Please. I was happy to be talking to a beautiful woman, but I’d left Alice waiting. I didn’t want to keep her waiting too long.

“That’s a shame,” said the woman regretfully. “Well then, here are your two passes. Please wear this wristband at all times once you’re inside. If you show this wristband to the staff beside each gate, you can go through without having to wait in line. There are also private walkways you can use in the busy areas, so please take your time to enjoy yourself.”

“Thank you.”

“Please enjoy your time here at the Blue Aquarium.”

The lady smiled as I turned to leave, and I hurried back to where Alice was waiting.

Alice Alford's Point of View

“What’s taking Kouki so long?” I wondered.

He said he was going to collect our passes, but then he headed off in the wrong direction. I wonder if everything’s all right? More importantly, I wonder if what I’m wearing looks okay.

I was wearing a new dress that I’d gone shopping for with Megumin, but I didn’t know if Kouki would like it. As I checked my reflection in a window, I saw the reflection of Kouki hurrying back toward me, so I turned to face him.

“Sorry, Alice. I didn’t think it would take me so long. Here you go,” he said.

“What is this?” I asked while examining the wristband Kouki had given me.

Kouki smiled and told me, “That’s your identification wristband. I had VIP tickets, so these are our passes. This means we’ll get priority access to the dolphin show you wanted to see.”

Huh? Aren’t VIP tickets supposed to be incredibly expensive? And I didn’t even give Kouki the money for my ticket... I nervously began reaching for some money from my bag, but then Kouki reached for my hand.

“There are a lot of people around, so how about we hold hands? That way we don’t get separated. Look, they’re opening the gate.”

I took Kouki’s hand, and he smiled as he led us towards the gate.



“Oh!” he cried. “Alice, there’s a penguin parade.”

“Where?” I asked.

We’d looked at several exhibits and were moving on to the next when Kouki pointed out a group of super cute penguins waddling along. We went to take a closer look, and found about thirty penguins slowly waddling behind a person who was leading them. When I crouched down to get a better look at the penguins, one of them stopped right in front of me, and looked me in the eye.

“Huh? What is it?” I asked the penguin.

“It must think you’re one of them, Alice,” said Kouki grinning.

My legs aren’t that short! I was just about to tell Kouki to stop teasing me, when the penguin in front of me raised its wing.

The person leading them noticed and turned around. “Well, this doesn’t happen very often. Go ahead and shake his hand.”

I gently took hold of the penguin’s wing. The penguin seemed satisfied, and it went back to waddling along after the others.

“Wasn’t that cute, Kouki?” I asked.

“Yeah. I had no idea penguins were so friendly toward people. Where should we go next? The jellyfish are nearby. We could go see those.”

“All right, let’s go.”

We walked hand in hand into the building where the jellyfish tanks were. Many types of jellyfish of many different colors were swimming around in a surprisingly small tank. There were also

some chairs where we could rest, so I sat there with Kouki, and we leisurely watched the jellyfish swimming.

“These jellyfish are so small and cute,” I said. “I thought they’d be bigger.”

“It depends on the species. Some jellyfish have heads that are four or five meters wide. Did you want to see those?”

A five-meter-wide jellyfish... I felt ill just imagining it. “I’d rather not.”

“Exactly. That’s why they’ve gathered these small jellyfish together. The way they pulsate is relaxing to watch.”

I looked at Kouki. He looked at peace sitting on the chair and watching the jellyfish. For some reason, I felt my heart racing.

I composed myself, and then I slowly rested my head against Kouki’s shoulder. For a moment, he was surprised, but he soon began to gently stroke my hair. For a while, we stayed like that, letting time go by. Then, suddenly, my stomach made a groaning sound.

“Ha. You must be hungry. Let’s go get lunch.”

I was too embarrassed to say anything. I stood up and silently took Kouki’s hand.

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“You must have been really hungry, Alice,” Kouki teased. “Are you enjoying that?”

I groaned and replied, “Can’t you forget about that?”

Kouki was teasing me with a grin on his face while he watched

me eat my pasta. I couldn't believe my stomach had made such a noise while I was on my first date with the boy I liked, and I felt so embarrassed I could have died. I'd replied to Kouki with tears in my eyes, but he'd just laughed and carried on eating.

What is that he's eating...? I wondered. "Kouki, didn't you order any sandwiches?"

"No, this was the only thing I liked," Kouki replied smiling.

In front of him was a plate of mashed potatoes with sliced hot dogs in it.

Does that mean he can't eat rice, even though he's Japanese? More importantly, that dish is meant to be eaten with bread, not just by itself. That said, he did look like he was enjoying it, and for some strange reason, that made me feel happy, too.

After eating, we drank some tea, and Kouki began using his terminal.

Kouki raised his head from the terminal and suggested, "Next, let's watch the afternoon dolphin show, and then visit the store before heading home. I think it'll be just starting to get late by then."

"You're right. We shouldn't let it get too late."

I wish we could stay together like this forever, but I don't want to get in trouble for staying out too long, I thought.

Kouki looked over at me just as I had that thought, and for a moment I felt my face becoming red, so I looked away.

"Alice.... I don't know how to say this..." he began.

Just as I was thinking *He's going to say it!* we heard an an-

nouncement: “The dolphin show will be starting in a few moments. Everyone with a ticket for the show, please gather in front of the show arena.”

I can't believe that announcement! What horrible timing!

I looked back at Kouki, and he just smiled wryly and said, “Shall we go?” before getting up.

We showed our wristbands at the arena entrance, and we were guided inside to our seats in the front row. We sat in the seats we'd been given, and as we waited, the seats around us began to fill up until the arena was filled to capacity.

“This show really is popular. I've been looking forward to this, too,” Kouki said enthusiastically. “This is the first time I've seen a dolphin firsthand.”

“We don't just to get to watch, we can actually participate in the show!” I agreed. “I'm really excited.”

I waited, full of excitement, and then we saw a lively group of dolphins swimming into view from a gate at the side of the pool. They swam around in a close-knit group, jumping up out of the water every so often. The trainer introduced the dolphins, and the show was full of surprises from that point on. At his command, they swam through rings in synchronization, juggled balls, and performed effortless high jumps. They were so adorable that I was completely entranced.

Kouki was excited, too. “They're more impressive than I thought.”

“Now it's time for a ring-throwing event with the dolphins,” the trainer said. “Does anyone want to join in?”

A woman in a wetsuit began looking for people who wanted to

throw rings.

I really want to... But I'm too embarrassed to raise my hand. I didn't know what to do, but then Kouki raised his hand and accepted some rings from the woman.

"Here you go, Alice," said Kouki, giving me all of the throwing rings. "Here come the dolphins. Hurry up and throw the rings."

I quietly said, "Thank you," and then threw a ring toward the dolphins.

I threw the first ring toward a dolphin that was waiting just in front of me, and it deftly swam backward to catch the ring. It was so cute to see, and in no time at all, I'd thrown all of the rings. Before I could return to my seat, the dolphin that had caught the most rings came swimming over while making clicking sounds.

"Why don't you reward it by petting it?" the woman suggested.

I petted the dolphin, and it began making happy noises before slowly swimming back to the other dolphins.

I watched it leave with a big smile on my face, and then returned to my seat where Kouki was waiting for me.

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"You got to pet the dolphin!" Kouki said. "How lucky."

"Yeah! That made me so happy."

After the show, we did a little shopping in a store that sold souvenirs, and then we went back to a park in the premises to wait for the bus home. I'd bought a dolphin plush toy for Megumin, and Kouki had bought a shark mouth hat for Saito. I was sure Megumin would be pleased, but Saito was definitely going to

pull a face. Kouki had probably realized that, and bought it to annoy him.

“Today was a lot of fun, Alice,” he said.

“It really was.”

I don't know what to do. I just can't get a conversation going. Kouki's trying to talk to me, but at this rate he was going to think, "Wow, she's so dull." I desperately tried to think of something interesting to talk about.

Kouki began to speak in a serious tone. “You know, I’ve been meaning to say this for a while, but...”

Could this be what he was trying to say over lunch? I don't know what to do... My heart's racing. I wonder if I'm blushing...

“Alice... There’s a price tag on your dress.”

Uwah?! No way? Huh?

“Huh? No way... I forgot to remove it?” I cried.

“Yeah, I’m serious. The tag saying that you paid ¥23,000 has been on your dress since morning.”

“Uuuugh. Why didn’t you tell me sooner? Telling me now just makes me feel bad.”

It's all over. Kouki will definitely hate me. What kind of girl leaves the price tag hanging from her clothes without realizing? I'm the worst... I hope the bus comes soon. I just want to go home.

“Hey, Alice?”

“What...?” I mumbled.

“I really like you.”

For a moment, that didn't even register.

What did he just say? He likes me? Kouki said he likes me... I'm happy, but... I don't know what to say.... Well, I have to say something. Kouki isn't saying anything. He must be waiting for a reply.

I was getting myself into a panic when suddenly he hugged me tightly.

“Is that bad?” he asked.

“It's not bad at all!” I hastened to say. “I really like you, too. So... let's just stay like this for a while.”

In contrast to a few moments ago, I felt so happy holding Kouki that I could have cried. Over his shoulder, I saw the bus approaching. But I wanted just a little longer... I wanted to stay like this a while longer, so I closed my eyes and pretended not to notice.

Chapter 9: Attack

In a dimly lit room, an assembly of people spoke in hushed voices. They were cloaked in distinctive white robes, and their gathering was reminiscent of the secret societies that had been fashionable in Europe more than 200 years ago.

“Well then, what of the demon child?” one of them asked.

“The child is conducting research at the International Science and Technology Academy in Japan.”

All those present glared disapprovingly at a photograph of Kouki Arakawa that lay on a desk lit by candlelight.

Someone who appeared to be an elder member of the group asked in a coarse voice, “How is Operation Demon Abduction progressing?”

Several people responded with the words, “All is well.”

The coarse-voiced master nodded deeply, and then loudly declared: “The time has come! We shall place the blood of the demon on the altar as an offering to our god!!”

The room filled with light as if illuminated by his voice. Hundreds of powered suits became visible. All were powered on and waiting.

Kouki Arakawa's Point of View

Today there was going to be a practical training session using powered suits, but as usual, I wasn't attending.

After I'd destroyed the new model of powered suit, we'd gone to the trouble of remaking it, and I was eager to try it out. Sadly, I was going to be left behind with Kon.

The principal had told me, "There's no need for you to participate, Arakawa. I'd much prefer it if you stayed in your research complex."

What did I do wrong? I wondered. Now I'm going to miss out on a good chance to show off in front of the girls in the class...

My brooding was interrupted by Alice, my girlfriend who I was now officially dating.

"Kouki, I was doing maintenance on my suit, and I found some of the parts are in bad condition," she said, sounding troubled. "Would you mind if I borrowed your personal suit?"

I didn't mind, but first I had to ask Shingo whether it'd been completely put back together after we'd dissembled it.

"Hey, Shingo. You know how we were analyzing my personal suit while making the new model?" I asked. "Did you fix it afterward?"

"Buh hee? The Quartet Corp suit? I fixed it and left it in the storage room."

If it's fixed, then it's not a problem, I decided.

I told Alice, "Go ahead and take it," and she happily bounded

off to the storage room. Shingo looked like he was about to head off to the training session, too, so I helped my friend put on his powered suit.

Shingo's suit is so heavy-duty. What was this thing designed to do? I wondered. I questioned him about that while fixing a thick plate of auxiliary armor to the back of it.

“It’s a second-generation military-use suit. They’re quite old, so I bought one that’d been sold off to civilians. This model was originally made for handling unexploded bombs.”

That makes sense. It's a suit for doing dangerous work. It didn’t look like it had much mobility, but it certainly looked robust.

Once it was fully set up, we checked each part, and found no defects.

“You should be able to see the training ground from this research complex,” Shingo said to me through an external speaker as he was turning to leave. “Why not head to the roof and watch us?”

After making his suggestion—which had been delivered incredibly loudly because he’d forgotten to adjust the volume—he headed off, his feet heavily crashing to the floor with each step.

I picked up Kon, who’d been knocked off his feet by the loud noise, and began climbing the stairs to the rooftop.

After reaching the rooftop, I looked out at my surroundings. I soon spotted a gathering of powered suits. I could see my own suit in within the group, which was no doubt being used by Alice.

I see Alice and Shingo, but which one is Aikawa? I wondered.

I tried looking through the binoculars I'd brought, but Aikawa wasn't wearing any of the suits that left the face visible.

Ah. There's someone kicking Shingo's suit from behind, I noticed finally.

His mobility was so poor that by the time he'd turned around, they'd moved behind him again. Even from here, I could tell that Shingo was getting agitated. Alice was nearby, but she was doing nothing to help. The other classmates hadn't told Ms. Roberta, either.

I guess the purple suit tormenting Shingo must be Aikawa.

As I watched, Shingo finally managed to grab Aikawa and lift her off the ground. He then passed her to Alice. As if she'd just had an idea, Alice then passed Aikawa to the suit next to her, which then passed Aikawa on to the next suit... Basically, Aikawa was being passed around like a baton for some reason.

"That looks like fun! Damn them!!" I yelled without thinking.

I turned to look at Kon and found him biting me in irritation.

I wish I'd gone along... I lamented.

Just then, I heard a far-off noise that sounded like an explosion. I picked up the binoculars, and looked in the direction of the sound. There, I saw powered suits jumping through the streets.

I'm pretty sure that jumping like that in the middle of town is forbidden. And why are there so many? There were over 300, and those were just the ones I could see! I soon heard more explosions just like the first one.

"What?!" I cried in confusion. "Is that gunfire? Is this some sort of battle?"

I'd visited self-defense force facilities with my mom, so I recognized the sporadic sounds I was hearing as gunshots. The Japan of this world was similar to the Japan I'd lived in before being reincarnated: Possession of personal firearms was essentially forbidden.

If there are gunshots, does that mean there's some major crime like a bank robbery going on? I took a look at one of the closer powered suits while feeling like an excited spectator. My excitement faded quickly.

"There's a Japanese flag painted on the shoulder. Isn't that a self-defense force suit?"

If the self-defense forces were prepared to open fire in the city area around so many civilians, this had to be either a terrorist attack or the outbreak of war. I couldn't believe that another country would so suddenly wage war on us when we'd been so peaceful up till now. A terrorist attack seemed the most likely option.

Do they even realize how close to the academy this battle is? I took a look over at where my friends were, and saw they were being evacuated by the academy's security personnel.

That's a relief... I went back to watching the happenings outside, and I saw a self-defense force suit being shot down. *They're really getting close to the academy now.*

That made me think that I should take refuge in the basement, but just as I climbed to my feet, a powered suit jumped onto the roof.

I spotted a "UN" emblem on its shoulder, and I blurted out, "The United Nations Army? What are you guys doing here?"

As I stood frozen in shock, a female voice came from its external speakers: "Kouki, we've got to get you away from here. For-

give me for being heavy-handed.”

Without waiting for me to respond, the suit in front of me grabbed me, and it began heading away from the battle while carrying me.

The suit had grabbed hold of my body directly, so I was being shaken around and was close to wetting myself in fear as I looked over to where my friends were. A portion of the academy wall had already been knocked down, and armed troops were flooding into the training ground.

Why would they be targeting the academy? I wondered. I saw Shingo holding Aikawa to protect her, but I didn’t know where Alice was. I could have asked the wearer of the powered suit carrying me to go back so we could find her, but I doubt she would have listened. *And I can’t believe we just abandoned Kon on the roof.*

More powered suits that seemed to be with the United Nations joined us.

These guys aren’t messing around... I quietly watched while being shaken around, and saw the powered suits around us suddenly begin firing their rifles into the air. I looked up at the sky to see what they were shooting at.

“A personnel transporter V/STOL?!”

There was no mistaking it. It was a new model of transport aircraft that my mom had developed.

If they’re bringing out that thing, that makes me really worried.

The suit carrying me began speaking once again. “We’re going to jump over the academy wall in a single bound. Clench your

teeth so you don't bite your tongue."

I clenched my teeth like I'd been told, and braced for the impact. There was a great crash, and I was shaken violently. We'd crossed over the wall.

At that moment, I saw my powered suit being pushed into the aircraft...

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Shuuichi Arakawa's Point of View

“What’s the situation?” I asked my adjutant, Louis.

He explained, “Today at 0930, an aircraft approaching from the Japan Sea incurred into Japanese airspace over mainland Japan. The craft followed a bombing course that stretched from the Noto Peninsula to Nagoya, via Toyama. At 0950, the Air Self-Defense Force scrambled to shoot down the invading aircraft. At the same time, a submarine surfaced offshore in Tokyo Bay, and began an attack on the capital.”

How could they have allowed Tokyo to be attacked? I had no outlet for my anger, so I had to suppress my feelings while drinking my coffee.

“At 1010, the Japanese government affirmed that this was a large-scale terrorist attack, and declared a national state of emergency on the basis of the civilian protection program. At 1015, a warning order was issued to all branches of the self-defense forces, and permission was granted for the immediate use of force. The self-defense forces are currently combat-ready.

“At 1030, the submarine that surfaced in Tokyo Bay was sunk. However, at 1045, three similar submarines, carrying armed soldiers, surfaced off the coast of the academy town. An attack was then initiated against the International Science and Technology Academy. The town’s defense forces were alerted, and they attempted to stop the invading forces. However, the town’s defense forces were completely annihilated. At 1130, the invading forces were allowed to enter the academy.

“As for your son, just as the attacking forces entered the academy, he was successfully extracted by a unit led by Clare, who was handling his defense today. They then evacuated to the nearest

self-defense force base. Clare also decided to assign a portion of the unit to protecting the academy. Some time ago it was reported that we had regained control of the academy.”

At least I can be relieved about that... There had of course been a human cost, but as a father, I naturally considered my son to be the most important thing. Clare had done well.

Louis informed me that there had been no casualties in the academy.

Was this terrorist group targeting Kouki? I wondered, and asked what we knew so far.

“At the current time, it’s believed that these attacks by the terrorist group were acts of sabotage to prevent the Japanese government from fighting back after they’d abducted your son. Some consider this highly likely because they abducted a student named Alice Alford who had been wearing your son’s powered suit for some reason.”

What does he mean, “some consider”? It’s like he’s holding something back. This isn’t like Louis.

“It’s just my personal view, but I don’t think this is correct,” Louis added.

So everything about the situation suggested that the target was Kouki, but Louis disagreed. *This is worth hearing...*

“What makes you think so?” I asked.

“Has any organization with this much military strength and organizational power ever accidentally targeted the wrong person? It may be true that Miss Alford was wearing your son’s personal suit. However, your son recently developed the eighth-generation suit. He also used that suit to perform a rescue after a

major accident. His actions were reported by news organizations around the world.”

That’s right. Kouki immediately rushed out to rescue survivors when that passenger ship collided with a tanker. As his father, his courage gives me nothing but pride.

“In that case, wouldn’t they expect him to be wearing the eighth-generation suit? There’s one more thing. There’s much that we don’t know about Miss Alford. Clare and Elise have been investigating her more carefully now that she’s your son’s girlfriend.”

I never asked them to do that, I thought indignantly. I’ve no problem with them admiring Kouki, but I won’t have them misusing our authority and resources like this! They’d better be ready for a grilling when this is over...

“I received information this morning regarding the ongoing investigation,” Louis continued. “It was found that no one named Alice Alford exists.”

Today would probably be the day I received the most shocking report I would ever receive in my life.

June 30, 2102: Japan Experienced an Unprecedented Terrorist Attack.

Although the circumstances suggested that the target of the abduction was Kouki Arakawa, the terrorists failed in their objective, and mistakenly abducted Alice Alford before withdrawing their forces from Japan.

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“I received information this morning regarding the ongoing

investigation. It was found that no one named Alice Alford exists.”

Today would probably be the day I received the most shocking report I would ever receive in my life. *The report has to be wrong*, I thought insistently. *All of Kouki’s friendships were investigated. If there was a nonexistent person, I would have been informed during the initial stages...*

Louis calmly shot down my objections: “No, there’s no doubt that she appeared suddenly. Alice Alford is a Canadian who was recommended to the academy by the Canadian government in recognition of her exceptional specialist knowledge in medicine. After passing the entrance exam, she was then admitted to the academy. She recently successfully developed a treatment effective against the European tragedy. It’s fair to say that she’s gifted with both intelligence and beauty, but there are absolutely no records of her before the age of 10. Clare went so far as to hack the main terminal of the Canadian government, but found no relevant information. All she was able to learn was the girl’s place of birth...”

Louis looked at me as if he was finding this hard to say. I doubt he found the look on my face very encouraging. I nodded to urge him to continue.

“Her birthplace was the ‘Genetic Research Institute,’ which was owned by the Canadian government. That research institute has since been shut down and the compound sealed off, following a fire. The time when the fire occurred is the same time that public records of Miss Alford first appeared. What’s more, records of an investigation regarding the Genetic Research Institute were found among old records from the Intelligence Department and Security Department of the United Nations. The records are sparse on details, but they mention a research project named the ‘Alice Project.’”

I understood why Louis had checked the look on my face. If what I was imagining was right, that would mean that research had been forbidden for ethical reasons.

I don't know what to make of this. This could just be some mistake, but I can't reject the idea completely.

I instructed him, "Louis, make a formal request to the Canadian government for more information. If you're reluctant, I don't mind you using my name. I've been given authority from up high to act at my discretion regarding matters related to Kouki. However, this is an incredibly delicate problem. I won't allow anyone to upset my son or injure my potential future daughter. Deal with this as discreetly as possible."

I folded my arms and collected my thoughts. *If Alice is mixed up in this, that really causes problems. Perhaps we need to make changes to our original rescue plan?*

"Commander, we've discovered the identity of the terrorist group," Louis added, after having received a communication from another department. "It's the same religious cult we dealt with before."

Hmm, they were the ones behind the ballistic missile. If this large-scale terror operation is considered, there's no longer any doubt that they're backed by a nation state. They've got more money, personnel, and equipment than any religious organization could get a hold of.

As I was putting together a full picture in my mind, Louis told me his opinion: "I think there's a high probability that this incident is related to Miss Alford, though there is a chance that my theory is completely wrong. Miss Alford might not have been the target. Your son's friends also include Saito Shingo, who saved the world from the asteroid with his artificially intelligent robots,

and Megumi Aikawa, whose name is well-known in space technology circles. We can't rule out the possibility that his friends were being targeted for some reason. Personally, I think we should protect those two until we have more information or the situation changes."

I can't argue with that, I decided. As long as we can't rule out any possibilities, we just have to make the best of our current situation.

I issued an order to Louis and my subordinates to protect Saito and Megumi as a matter of urgency, and then I resumed thinking.

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Intelligence Officer Clare's Point of View

I felt numb every moment I spent carrying Kouki from the academy to the self-defense force base. My specialty had only ever been intelligence analysis; it had never been part of my duties to equip a powered suit and engage in battle.

Why did this have to happen today of all days?!

Baldy was handling what normally would have been my duty by helping to defend the academy, so he couldn't accompany me.

That bald idiot's duty is supposed to be protecting Kouki!! He should be the one delivering Kouki to the base while we handle the defense. As I grumbled to myself, the self-defense force base came into view.

I saw that there was a fair number of powered suits in operation, and tanks had been deployed in the area, probably because a state of emergency had been announced.

I received a transmission from the operator of the base: "This is the Japan Ground Self-Defense Force. Clearly state your affiliation. If you approach without authorization, you will be shot down."

I couldn't stop myself from yelling at the sender of that stupid transmission: "We're with the United Nations! Haven't you already been informed by your government?! We have our identification signals turned on, so if you so much as lock on to us, we'll return fire immediately. If you've got that, then please open the gate. I intend to run right through without stopping."

After making my declaration, I ran at the gate without slowing down, and they hastily began opening it. We slipped through the

small gap in the gate, and ran into the base. Deep within the base, I gently placed Kouki on the ground in a heavily guarded store room.

I thought there would be no way he could walk straight after being shaken around at that speed for so long, but to my surprise, he walked with steady feet. I removed my powered suit and ran over to him. His face was pale, but he seemed to recognize me.

“Oh. You’re the lady who wanted the rocket. I recognized your voice,” he said weakly.

“That’s right,” I told him. “Do you have motion sickness? I’ll give you some medicine for it, so please rest in the officers’ quarters.”

He shook his head, and with determination in his eyes, he refused my offer. “I’m worried about Alice,” he said. “Could you lend me a communications device or put me in touch with my mom?”

I felt bad for Kouki, but I didn’t have permission to do that. I appeased him by telling him I’d raise it with my superiors, and urged him to rest in the officers’ quarters. He seemed to think it over for a moment, and then he promised to take the medicine and get some rest.

After shutting him in the room, I remembered the report I’d received that morning.

If Kouki knew that Alice Alford—the girl he loved—was an artificially created human, would he be able to go on loving her?

**

Several hours later, I was engaged in a video call in the communications room using a private line set up by the self-defense

forces. The commander was visible on a screen. To the side of that screen were screens displaying the senior personnel from the United Nations, leaders of each member state, and Miki Arakawa.

I felt my heart race as I stood before the true leaders of the world.

The commander began asking the questions. “What’s the situation there?”

At first, I was lost for words, but then I collected myself and replied. “We have completed our primary objective by ensuring Kouki’s absolute security,” I said. “His friends Shingo Saito and Megumi Aikawa also arrived approximately two hours ago. Those two are also under heavy security.”

My report was met with a satisfied nod and a response of, “Good work.”

Deputy Commander Louis, who had been quiet by the commander’s side, took over to give his explanation.

“At the United Nations Special Operations Unit, we’ve determined that this series of terror attacks was part of a plan to abduct Alice Alford under the guise of an attempt to abduct Kouki Arakawa. For more details, please read the reports that you’ve all been given. The abduction of Miss Alford was most likely their primary objective. We believe that Kouki’s abduction and assassination was a secondary objective. We suspect that the organization pulling the strings behind this cult has some connection to the Genetic Research Institute, but we have no conclusive evidence at this point. Following this incident, the Canadian government has agreed to inspect the sealed-off research institute, and has promised to provide us with more information.”

I should have known that girl had something to do with this, I thought. In that case, the suspicions I’ve had since arriving here

must be correct.

However, Louis wasn't finished.

"In order to bring all the facts to light, we're attempting to resolve this incident as quickly as possible. At present, a rescue team has been formed primarily of the United Nations Standing Army, but because this terror organization is so big, the rescue team is more like a rescue army. We've confirmed that the terror organization has fully withdrawn from Japan, and all of their troops are now situated on an uninhabited island in South East Asia. The island is surrounded by sea and visibility is high, so approaching the island is incredibly difficult. We're currently searching for a solution to this problem."

After hearing this explanation, the prediction I'd made felt like more of a certainty. The commander seemed to have noticed a change in my expression, and he urged me to share what I was thinking.

I put into words the ideas I'd formed by analyzing the information in my own way as an intelligence analysis officer.

"First, allow me to share my initial conclusion. We're in possession of a powered suit capable of approaching the island with no trouble, but there's only one such unit in the world. I'm sure that none of you have forgotten it. The unit is capable of solo flight over a distance of 3,200 kilometers while breaking the sound barrier. It's also capable of re-entering Earth's atmosphere from space, and is equipped with optical camouflage. I am of course referring to the eighth-generation suit, which appears to have been designed for this very situation."

At this, there was a commotion from the video screen: "He predicted everything, and produced a solution in advance."

Events like this went some way to explaining why Kouki was

known as the “demon child.”

“Why did he hurry to the scene in a prototype during the accident at sea despite the danger?” I continued. “I believe his primary intention was to save human lives, but this may also have been a practical test of the prototype. It’s true that he put the thrusters to use at full power. Following this, he developed optical camouflage supposedly for the sake of merely peeping on girls. I believe that he needed to expedite the development, and this was an extreme measure for the sake of giving an excuse to those around him. In truth, the technology was applied to his powered suit after completion, and never used for such foolish purposes after that point. What’s more, after the prototype was thrown into the sea, an identical suit was produced, which I think is proof of my theory.”

When I’d had my say, those displayed on the screen raised various objections: “That’s absurd.” “Then he truly is a demon child.” “Exactly how far ahead can this boy see?”

There was just one person who remained silent, but after a time, Miki Arakawa had her say.

“Are you saying that even after my son predicted this entire situation, you’re still willing to abandon him?”

What? That’s not even close to what I was saying!! Please don’t look at me like I’m some kind of insect. I frantically tried to put the misunderstanding right while cold sweat dripped from my brow.

“That’s not what I’m suggesting. It may well be that Kouki intends to resolve this entire situation himself. His girlfriend, Miss Alford, is deeply involved in everything we’ve been discussing. This is entirely baseless conjecture on my part, but... I believe that Kouki had already learned the secret of Miss Alford’s origin

from his own sources. Although we've been studying logs of Kouki's communications, it's unclear whether we've had access to everything. When he learned the secret about his girlfriend, he chose to protect the girl rather than reject her. He planned to settle everything secretly, to protect the person he loved from harm.

"When I first saw the information about Miss Alford, I thought, 'If Kouki knew that she was an artificially created human, would he be able to go on loving her?' However, when this explanation for Kouki's actions is considered, my initial thought seems vulgar to me. I don't think Kouki is the sort of person to care about something like that.

"He acted for the sole purpose of protecting his girlfriend without discussing it with anyone. What he didn't anticipate was that this terrorist organization is much larger than anyone imagined."

My reasoning had left everyone speechless. Then the President of the United States softly spoke.

"We're sitting here wasting time in this meeting while the boy is ready to fight them by himself."

That caused the meeting to continue on at an increased pace.

The first thing we decided was that we'd ask Kouki to cooperate as a decoy in the rescue operation. This was made possible by the fact that only he could pilot the eighth-generation suit. It pained us greatly to be forced to rely on a child in such a situation, but we saw no alternative.

Next, we decided that 20% of the United Nations's military power would be used in the operation. It was also decided that nations larger than Japan, which was still in disarray, would supply further military power as support.

The core of our plan was a strategy suggested by Miki Arakawa. A strategy that no normal person would ever have conceived of.

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Kouki Arakawa's Point of View

After taking some medicine and sleeping in a room for a while, I was able to calmly think things over in my head.

When Alice had been taken, I'd been so distressed that I hadn't been able to process what was happening; but that was no longer the case.

Alice had been wearing my powered suit. It was the made-to-order suit that my mom had bought from Luin Corp. I knew it was no ordinary suit, but when I'd read the specifications while building our new model of suit, I'd been surprised to read, "The powered suit that you've purchased is an improved version of our highest-level VIP protection model."

To summarize, that powered suit couldn't be opened without inputting a 30-character password, and if it was placed in emergency mode, the wearer could remain inside for up to two days.

There was also food and water stored beneath the user's seat, so there was nothing to worry about. Alice knew these things; she'd laughed with me about it when we'd read those specifications. Right now, she'd probably sealed herself inside the suit with emergency mode activated.

Even if they tried to force the suit open without the password, the suit was capable of withstanding even a shot from a main battle tank, so opening it wouldn't be so easy. What was more, the suit had been fiendishly designed to release tear gas into its surroundings if anyone tried to force it open. I was sure Alice would be afraid, but all she had to do was sleep inside the suit. The rescue team would no doubt prioritize finding her.

"Now that I've stopped worrying, I'm suddenly hungry..."

I was about to leave the room and go looking for food, but then the lady who'd carried me to the base entered the room with perfect timing.

“Kouki, we're going to head to the Japan Space Exploration Division's megafloat. And I guess you must be hungry? I prepared sandwiches so we can eat on the way there.”

This lady was as considerate as she was beautiful. It was hard to believe that she was wasted as one of Macho Man's subordinates.

I really wish she'd quit that job and come work for my mom... I thought while being put into a helicopter ready to travel.

Once inside the helicopter, a question came to mind, and I asked it with my mouth full of sandwich. “Why was I the only one taken from the academy? Was it because of who my mother is?”

I don't want special treatment just because of that. How will I be able to look everyone in the eye if I'm the only one running from the danger? And if Alice was abducted while wearing my powered suit, that must mean they were after me. I wanted more information about everything.

The lady answered as if she was scolding me. “First of all, we might be giving you special treatment, but we have also protected your friends Saito and Aikawa. You're the ones who made the only treatment effective against the European tragedy. Every nation in the world has a responsibility to give you special treatment. Try to understand how important a contribution you've made to this world.

“We're giving Aikawa special treatment because she's a good friend of yours. We decided she needed protecting because there was a risk of her being targeted in the attack. We're not sure why Miss Alford was abducted... They may have been targeting you, or

she may have been the target from the start. In either case, that's for the investigation team to look into after this is over, and it's not something I should concern myself with."

We remained silent after she'd told me the details. I needed time to think about what she told me, and she was constantly busy using her terminal.

After an hour passed, the megafloat came into view through the window.

It wasn't until we finally arrived that a basic question occurred to me. *Why have they brought me all the way out here?* Before I could ask, the lady asked me to climb out of the helicopter.

"I'd like you to go immediately to the central control room. Your mother is waiting for you there. Let her tell you what our plans are."

Um, okay. Seems like everything is going according to some sort of plan. I can barely keep up with it all.

**

The control room had been alive with voices, but there was a sudden silence when I entered. I headed over to Mom, feeling a little out of place.

Mom noticed me approaching, and she looked over at me before beginning to speak. "Kouki, there's not much time, so I'll spare you the details. I'd like you to help with our plan to rescue Alice."

What?! Why me? If there's something I can do, then of course I'd do it, but I'm just a high schooler.

I told her my doubts, but Mom just smiled and said, "This is

something only you can do, Kou.”

That can only mean one thing... I just know they're going to make me do something crazy.

“Listen carefully,” Mom said. “Make sure you remember everything I’m saying, and save all of your questions for the end. Like I’ve said, we don’t have much time, so I need you to concentrate.” An image appeared on a large screen behind her as she spoke. “We’ve learned that Alice has been taken to an uninhabited island in southeast Asia. This is the main base of the terrorist organization. At present, the United Nations’s army and armies of major nations are cooperating in a recovery operation. However, there’s one problem... The island is surrounded by sea, and visibility is high. We’ll be spotted the moment we try to approach the island. This makes attack from the sea impossible, and a similar problem applies to the sky above because the airspace is monitored by a radar network.

“To make matters worse, a low-pressure front is approaching that area of the sea. There’s a forecast for a large storm nine hours from now, and the storm is expected to last for approximately three days. Basically, the powered suit that Alice is wearing isn’t going to be able to protect her. Do you understand so far?”

After I fully digested what Mom had told me, I realized, *Oh man, that means we’ve only got nine hours to rescue Alice...* I nodded my head and urged her to go on.

“We have only one solution to this problem. That’s to have the new powered suit that you developed infiltrate the island alone, and then use smoke bombs and electronic jamming bombs to block the radar across the entire island. That will give the rescue team an opening to descend on the island, and they’ll quickly withdraw after rescuing Alice.”

They're asking me because I'm the only one who can pilot that thing... This all makes sense now.

“Well then, allow me to explain the procedure,” Mom said. “We’d like to put you in a specially prepared space in a warhead fitted to a ballistic missile scheduled to launch one hour and thirty minutes from now. Once you reach orbit, you’ll separate from the warhead, and re-enter the atmosphere 30 kilometers from the target island while slowly orbiting the Earth.

“I’ll make the necessary calculations here on the ground, so there’s no need for you to worry about that. You mustn’t forget to activate the optical camouflage once you’re 10,000 meters above the target. When you reach 2,000 meters, you should begin to fly using the suit’s thrusters, and approach the island flying at a height of 15 meters so as to avoid the radar network. When you arrive on the island, immediately ascend to 40 meters, and then randomly scatter the missiles you’ll have with you. When you’re finished, quickly withdraw. We’ll prepare a ship to meet you at the other side, so please board that ship. Have you any questions?”

Questions? There're a million things I'd like to say. Will this even work? What happens if I fail? What if the storm arrives earlier than forecast? My list of doubts was endless, but after being told I was the only one who could do this, there was only one response I could give. This was to save Alice.

I gave Mom my response: “None.”

“Good answer. This is why I’m proud that you’re my son. You’ll need to prepare, so go get suited up, and you’ll be given more precise instructions about boarding the warhead.”

Once I’d received those precise instructions, I immediately equipped my powered suit and was loaded into the missile.

I waited nervously, listening to the launch countdown.

“Launching in 50 seconds... 49... 48... 47...”

I was genuinely scared. My legs were shaking at the thought that I might be about to die.

“30... 29... 28... 27...”

But unless I did this, there was no way to save Alice. I couldn’t tolerate the idea of never seeing her smile again.

“5 seconds... 4... 3... 2... 1. We have ignition.”

“All right!! I’m coming for you, Alice! I’ll save you, no matter what!!” I yelled as I flew towards space.

**

I was at an altitude of 20,000 km. I couldn’t see anything because I’d been jammed inside the warhead, but I was sure I was in space. Until a few moments ago, I’d been able to feel the warhead vibrating, but now all I felt were the slight mechanical sounds and vibrations coming from my powered suit. If everything I’d been told was accurate, the warhead was now heading straight for the target.

Is this really going to work out?

Just as concerns were growing in my mind, I received a transmission from my mom: “Kouki, can you hear me? The signal is transmitting normally, so everything should be okay.”

That’s right. I’d forgotten... The suit was nothing but a prototype, so it had no means for sending transmissions back to Earth from orbit. As long as I was here, this was going to be a one-sided conversation.

“You’ll need to separate from the warhead in a moment. Make sure your suit is airtight and isn’t leaking oxygen.”

There were some small vibrations and white clouds filled my vision. That was probably the remaining oxygen inside the warhead escaping out in space. Airtightness wasn’t a problem. That wasn’t a problem, but...

“Why do I have to be spinning?!”

I couldn’t be blamed for shouting in anger. This was the sort of situation where you’d normally gaze at Earth while in awe at how beautiful it was!! Although it was a slow rotation, I couldn’t just relax and watch the Earth because I was spinning as I traveled.

“You might be wondering why you’re rotating,” Mom said. “It’s unavoidable because you’re not being drawn in by gravity. That makes it hard to fly straight. If you’d like to admire the Earth, you’ll have to wait until next time.”

As expected of Mom, she’d known exactly what I was thinking. I gave up on admiring the Earth, but since I’d gone to the trouble of bringing a tube of juice, I took it from my pocket so I could drink it while floating in space. My excitement grew as I watched the juice floating in front of me.

Just then I received another transmission: “10 minutes remaining until re-entry. I know you’re probably playing with your juice right now, but you need to brace yourself. Focus on your suit’s orientation control until you reach an altitude of 15,000 meters, two minutes from now.”

Does this thing have surveillance cameras? I drank up all of the floating juice, and forced myself to deal with the reality before me. *The smallest mistake here could mean death...*

My heart began racing, but I took some deep breaths and told

myself to stay calm.

A picture taken with my friends was displayed on the screen in the center of the operation panel. I looked at Alice, who was at the edge of the photograph, doing her best to stay far away from Chabane. Then I fastened my seat belt.

“Beginning re-entry. I won’t be able to contact you after you enter the atmosphere. If anything unexpected happens, do whatever you think is best.” Mom ended the communication.

The Earth gradually became larger.

Come to think of it, I’ve never heard of anyone re-entering atmosphere wearing just a powered suit, I realized. Is this really a good idea?

It was the suit that we’d all made. The suit Shingo had fine-tuned. The suit Mom had made finishing touches to. I wanted to have faith that it wouldn’t break so easily.

“Hngh.” I clenched my teeth while trying to endure vibrations and G forces strong enough to pin my body in place.

Then the vibrations suddenly stopped.

When I opened my eyes, the altitude meter said I was at 11,000 meters. I reached out and flicked the switch for the optical camouflage. An indicator light lit up, but I wasn’t confident that the camouflage was truly functioning.

When I get back, I need to ask Shingo to think of some way to confirm that it’s working. Could optical camouflage that we made for peeping actually be fit for military purposes? I wondered.

Beep beep beep! Beep beep beep!

As I continued to fall, an alarm sounded to warn me that I'd reached an altitude of 2,000 meters. I activated my thrusters to slow my descent, and focused on flying at an altitude of 15 meters or less like Mom had said.

If I don't send out a friend-or-foe identification signal soon, won't I be attacked by the troops surrounding the island? They might not be able to see me, but I can be detected by infrared, and I could be easily targeted using heat-seeking missiles. I'll just have to hope that they won't be able to hit me if they don't know which direction to aim in.

The instant I sent out my identification signal, mysterious radio waves came flying at me.

"Huh? What's this?" I murmured.

Don't tell me I've been spotted? I broke out into a cold sweat, but that didn't seem to be it.

I analyzed the radio wave using equipment that had been added to the suit on the megafloat while the suit had been refitted for this operation.

It turned out that the radio wave was a communication signal used by the United Nations. *It looks like some kind of position information, but I can't make sense of it. It's a signal from an ally, so I'd better permit it, anyway...* After making my decision, I hit a switch to accept the transmission.

The moment I hit the switch, the radio wave stopped for a moment, but the sender seemed to realize that I'd permitted the transmission. An incredible amount of data was then sent to me. Unfortunately, I didn't know how to make use of any of it. If Shingo had been here, he'd have understood the transmission, but all I could do was let it wash over me.

Still, amidst the data, I found one piece of information that seemed useful.

“This must be a navigation signal,” I told myself. “It seems there’s a submarine transmitting it.”

A fleet of submarines deployed around the island was showing me a relatively safe route forward. For that, I was truly grateful. I transmitted, “Thank you,” on the same frequency, and continued to approach the island while following the navigation signal.

I reached the sky above the island, and began to randomly scatter my stockpile of missiles as planned... However, the installations on the ground were returning fire with such intensity that it was a real problem. They might not have been able to see me, but they could definitely hear me, and surface-to-air attacks were being fired into every piece of sky that they suspected might contain me.

“Not good! Not good! Not good!”

I was frantically firing smokescreens and jamming bombs while running away, but the situation was hopeless.

I'm going to die! This is no job for a high schooler!! There goes another tracer round, flying right by me. I've had enough... I want to withdraw already.

I was half crying and planning my escape when I suddenly received a transmission.

“This is the paratrooper unit. We’ve confirmed that jamming is in effect over the entire island. We’re commencing the recovery operation using all of our forces!” cried a brave voice.

I watched as several large transport aircraft came flying in. The transmission seemed to have been sent out on all frequen-

cies.

All right, I'm out of here!! I fully opened my thrusters, and began to withdraw from the island. I dropped my altitude by as much as I could, and passed through a jungle to where I could see the sea. That was when I received a new transmission addressed to me.

“Kouki, good work! Feel free to withdraw. I’ve sent you the location of a ship that’s waiting for you, so head straight for it.”

I feel bad, but I'm already heading away from the island over the sea! The paratrooper unit had just sent me that transmission, but I was already out at sea. *I hope they won't realize that I withdrew early,* I thought. I looked over at the recovery point that I’d been told of, and almost crashed.

“I’m on the wrong side of the island!”

The recovery point was shown on the side of the island furthest away from where I’d been heading.

That's a problem... I’d ended up at the wrong side of the island after losing track of where I was while dodging enemy fire. Now I’d have to sneak around the outside of the island to reach the ship.

Having made my decision, I lowered my altitude as far as I could.

Flying three meters above sea level, I saw the paratrooper unit fighting as I looked toward the island. I could see that, despite their best efforts, they were being pushed back. Unlike me, they didn’t have optical camouflage, and many of them were being shot down.

“ ... ”

Can I really just withdraw in this situation? While everyone else had been trying to save Alice, I'd turned my back on the island. But even if I went back, there was nothing I could do. I couldn't even fire a rifle, and I wasn't carrying any weapons. At best, I could act as a decoy.

I remembered what Mom had told me before ending her transmission: "If anything unexpected happens, do whatever you think is best."

What would be best in this situation would be the safe descent of the paratrooper unit. I decided on a course of action. I sent a transmission to the submarine that had sent me the navigation signal earlier.

"This is Arakawa. Can you hear me?"

I was unsure whether they'd understand my Japanese, so I was surprised when they responded in kind.

"This is the operator of the United Nations submarine *Tolstoy*. We hear you loud and clear."

"I'm heading back to the island to act as a decoy. If it's not too much trouble, could you inform the paratrooper unit?"

I had to wait for some time after I'd sent my transmission before I got a response from *Tolstoy*. I let my suit hover in position as I waited for the response. As I was waiting, I saw the scale of the battle increasing. Time had been slowly slipping away, but the response I received wasn't what I'd hoped for.

"I contacted my superior, but they couldn't give authorization. Please withdraw."

No, no, no!! What's with this bureaucratic approach? Those are your comrades fighting out there! Give them the message. I

was about to start yelling at them, but my transmission was interrupted.

“Unfortunately, your position and the plan you suggested have been transmitted to the paratrooper unit in ‘error.’ We attempted to rectify this mistake, but we had already received acknowledgment from the paratrooper unit.”

These seemed like people I could rely on.

Well, if you’ve made a mistake, we have to make the most of it... I thought with a grin.

I responded while suppressing my laughter: “Roger that. It’s unfortunate, but I’ll have to withdraw. However, my GPS was damaged when I was being fired at earlier. I might take a course that causes me to enter the island ‘in error,’ so please take care not to shoot me down.” Then I flew back to the island with my thrusters fully open.

Once I’d arrived on the island, I reactivated my optical camouflage and moved slowly with my thruster output reduced so the noise wouldn’t give me away. I slowly made my way into an anti-aircraft installation that was continuously firing into the sky.

“Hey!”

I deactivated my camouflage right in the middle of the installation, and yelled through my speakers while waving my arms. They were so shocked to see me suddenly appear that their anti-aircraft fire completely stopped.

The soldiers began frantically firing their rifles, but they soon realized that that was ineffective, and they turned the anti-aircraft gun towards me instead.

All right! Just as I’d hoped, they were focusing all of their at-

tention on me. I immediately reactivated my camouflage, and ran off at full speed. After I'd run off while swerving left and right, they once again began firing into the sky, so this time I entered from the opposite direction.

“Yo!”

I made myself visible while waving my arms, as if I was just there to mock them. Through my cameras, I could see soldiers becoming red in the face.

They began shooting at me again, so I headed off to disrupt another installation. I looked back over my shoulder, and I was pleased to see that the soldiers from the first installation weren't firing into the sky anymore because they were still looking for me.

After I'd played the same trick in various places, I could see that the paratrooper unit would be able to descend safely.

“They should be fine now. The anti-aircraft guns are all looking out for me, so this is the perfect opportunity.”

This time I began heading toward the extraction point for real, but then I spotted my powered suit being loaded onto a truck.

**

Alice Alford's Point of View

Soon after being loaded onto a transport plane by people with guns, I activated the powered suit's emergency mode to barricade myself inside. This was the suit that Kouki's mom had bought, and it was no exaggeration to call it a fortress that used extreme measures to protect her son.

I should be safe in here until the battery runs out.

After several hours of traveling on the plane, I could tell from the sounds outside that I was being loaded onto a truck. For just a moment, I switched back to the ordinary mode so I could look out at my surroundings.

"This looks like a jungle..." I murmured. "The outside temperature is 38°C. I must be somewhere in the tropics."

I switched back to emergency mode, and sat hugging my knees.

How will anyone save me when they don't know where I am? When I felt like I was about to cry, I remembered what my dad had told me: "*Alice, you're special. There may come a day when you find yourself in danger. When the time comes, stay calm and wait to be rescued. Your dad or someone else who cares a lot about you will definitely come to save you, so don't be afraid.*"

Back then I'd never imagined that anything like this could happen, and now that I was in this situation, I felt overwhelmed by fear and anxiety. The terminal on my left arm caught my eye, and I touched the screen absentmindedly. A photograph that I'd taken with my friends appeared on the desktop.

It was a photograph of Kouki, Saito, and Megumin with Chabane. I was right at the edge of the photograph because I wasn't comfortable around Chabane. Even in those final moments, I'd never touched Chabane, and now I regretted having treated Chabane so unfairly. Kouki and Saito were smiling and grabbing Chabane's antennae in the photograph, while Megumin was holding Saito's sleeve and smiling.

"Will I ever see my friends again?" I asked myself in the quietest voice.

Just then, I heard what sounded like someone trying to break apart the suit's exterior from the outside! They were repeatedly pounding on the suit, but then there was the sound of gas being released, and everything went quiet.

I suspected that the anti-intruder tear gas had been released, but I began crying in fear. "Oh... I'm scared... Kouki."

By the time I came to my senses, I checked my terminal and found that almost two hours had passed. It seemed I'd cried myself to sleep.

Did something wake me up? I worried. I listened and heard sounds coming from far away.

Those are explosions just like what I heard at the academy. I'm sure of it. Has someone come to save me? I held my breath, and listened carefully. I could hear the sound of something flying around at high speed while explosions continued to go off.

"Should I activate the suit?" I asked myself.

I was about to press the activation button, when I suddenly had second thoughts. If I wasn't about to be rescued, I'd just be wasting the battery.

It'd be better to wait patiently, I decided. I stayed waiting while listening to the explosions, and then I heard the truck begin to move.

I can't just sit here and do nothing!

I was sure the noise outside was part of an attempt to rescue me. I panicked and decided to move.

I hit the button to activate the powered suit, and tried to stand up as soon as it returned to normal operating mode. But I was fixed in place and couldn't move. Suddenly, all of my power systems failed...

"The battery must have run out."

I must have used up the last of the battery power while kicking my legs in an attempt to break free. I went back to cowering with my arms wrapped around my knees.

The powered suit wouldn't be able to protect me anymore. All they needed was some heavy machinery, and they'd be able to force the suit open without any problems. My captors seemed to have realized this, and I heard a new heavy clanging sound as something impacted the suit's armor.

"I wish I could see Kouki one last time..." I whispered, before preparing myself for whatever was to come.

That was when I heard a voice from outside: "Alice, I saw you move a moment ago, so I guess you're still in there? Come on out."

I must be imagining things, I thought. *I really thought I heard Kouki's voice just now. But even if I am rescued, there's no way Kouki himself would be here. It's just a delusion caused by how much I want to see him again.*

However, I was still hearing the voice. “Aliiiiiiiiice! Hey! I’m actually going to get killed at this rate! Please, climb out and get into my suit.”

I deactivated my suit and opened the hatch, and there was Kouki reaching out his hand to me.

“Quick! The truck driver was scared and ran off, but he might be back. Get into my suit, so we can escape.”

I was still shaking as I approached Kouki. The hand of his suit grabbed me and pushed me into the cockpit. Kouki put me on his lap and stroked my hair.

“Good work, Alice. You must be tired. Let’s head home,” he said with a smile. Then he began transmitting a message to somewhere. “*Tolstoy*, can you hear me? I’ve rescued Alice. I’d head to the extraction point now, but I don’t have enough fuel to use the thrusters now that I’m carrying another person. Will you be able to extract us instead?”

“This is *Tolstoy*. Roger that. Please wait for us to surface.”

Kouki looked so cool as he sent a transmission with a confident look on his face. He looked a little uncomfortable when I suddenly started hugging him, but I’d had to go through a lot by myself. I thought it was fair that I should have this reward.

While holding him tight, I asked Kouki something I’d been wondering about. “How did you even get here?”

He gave me an incredible explanation as if it was no big deal. “You remember the megafloat, right? The place where we saw off Chabane. I was launched into space on a rocket from there, and then I re-entered Earth’s atmosphere, and flew to the island.”

Space? I know he used a rocket, but still, Kouki’s saying that

he flew tens of thousands of kilometers just to rescue me? He looks as though he thinks it's no big deal. Isn't he aware of how amazing this is?

"I don't think he realizes at all..." I whispered.

"Did you say something?" Kouki asked.

I smiled and shook my head. No matter what incredible thing the boy I loved did, he never bragged about it, or even realized what he'd done.

Behind his back, people would say that he was "just trying to act cool" or "just an idiot," but I believed that Kouki genuinely considered it all to be "small stuff that isn't worth thinking about." For Kouki to consider something "incredible," I was sure it would have to be something so amazing that it would be a new frontier for humankind. I knew that someday the time would come when he did achieve something that amazing.

Will I be standing beside Kouki when it happens? I wondered. Of course I will. I'm going to make sure I'm at his side!

I made that promise to myself as I watched a submarine surface and come into view. We were flying straight for it, so it had to be *Tolstoy*. We gently touched down on its surface.

Someone who appeared to be the captain came out on the deck, and bowed deeply before addressing us. "Welcome to *Tolstoy*! It's an honor to welcome such a hero aboard."

"Thanks, but I'm hardly a hero," Kouki replied with a wry smile.

The look on Kouki's face made me laugh. *He really doesn't realize...*



Miki Arakawa's Point of View

I was in a video call with Shuuichi. It had been half a day since the rescue had been completed successfully, and I was still waiting at home for Kouki to return. *I suppose he's been quite busy throughout all of this.* It was clear from Shuuichi's tired face that recent events had taken a toll on him. But I still needed him to tell me how it could have happened.

Shuuichi's voice was sullen. "Sorry, Miki, we didn't see it coming."

What's going on here? The entire island should be controlled by United Nations forces. They just need to search it for evidence. I know they'll find something. I sternly pressed Shuuichi for more answers.

"First, an archbishop of that same religious group was the one who plotted this incident," he said. "Unfortunately, he escaped. Somehow, he broke through, even though we had the island carefully surrounded."

"That's impossible! We had over a hundred ships and satellites monitoring the island. How could he have possibly escaped?"

"You're right. It's impossible. And yet, he really did escape. I'm certain that one of the countries participating in the operation was leaking information to them. The same goes for the installations they'd set up. Those weren't something that a religious organization would be able to put together. And can you believe this? They even had nuclear weapons that were in violation of international treaties."

What's going on? Was Kouki their target? Or was it Alice they were targeting?

“We questioned the survivors, and it seems they believed Kouki was inside the suit they’d captured. There’s no doubt that some of those insane fanatics wanted to assassinate Kouki. However, when we searched the archbishop’s room, we found some documents that had been left behind.”

Shuuichi paused, and his face became the face of a professional military officer.

“The documents contained a photograph of Kouki and Alice. I’m not sure, but I think they would have been satisfied regardless of whether it was Kouki or Alice inside that suit. They would have been pleased to have erased either one of the two... That’s the conclusion I’ve reached.”

If a nation state was involved, that was going to make any investigation difficult. Even more so if it happened to be a large nation. I asked Shuuichi for his thoughts.

“For now, we’re focusing on capturing the archbishop,” he said. “If we can capture him, everything will become clear. Determining which country is leaking out information is secondary, but after entrusting the task to Clare, she managed to find some leads. Though Alice could be a bigger problem.”

“I know... If Kouki is happy, then this isn’t a problem that we should be involved in,” I agreed. And I’d never want to exacerbate the situation if that might harm the girl that could be his wife someday.”

“That’s good enough for me,” he said. “Our investigation into the Alice Project is ongoing, and I only know about her from photographs and reports. What type of girl is she? She looks like a good match for Kouki... Though she’s not quite as beautiful as you. By the way, does Kouki still laugh about me and call me ‘Macho Man’?”

Shuuichi certainly did have more muscles than brains, so I couldn't exactly say that "Macho Man" wasn't fitting for him. On the other hand, the real reason Kouki made fun of him was probably because we couldn't let Kouki know that Shuuichi was assigned to the United Nations Special Forces.

"You know..." he said aloud, "someday Kouki is going to see the special forces on TV or in a movie, and he'll say, 'Wow, they're so cool.' I think I'll start my reply with, 'Well, the truth is, your dad is...' Then I'll tell him all about how I'm assigned to the United Nations Spe—"

I'd heard everything I needed to hear, and "Macho Moron" was getting a little overexcited, so I ended the call.

We'll have to increase Kouki's security. From now on, we'll handle security for Alice, too. That just leaves...

As I was making preparations for Kouki's return home, I suddenly remembered something: *Oh. I completely forgot about Kon.*

Chapter 10: Digging a Hot Spring

“Haah...” Shingo sighed deeply.

Alice and Aikawa had needed to go home early, so Shingo and I were together in the research complex after school.

I looked up from feeding ice cream to Kon, and asked Shingo, “What’s wrong?”

“I can’t think of a gift to give Megumi for her birthday.” He collapsed into a heap on the desk while looking at me and Kon as if to say, “I’m done for!”

All he has to do is give her some brand-name goods that she’ll like... I thought.

But I didn’t want to give Shingo such a lazy reply when he was clearly worried, so I decided I’d also give it some thought.

I don’t even know when her birthday is, I realized. That’s going to affect how much time we have to prepare something.

“When is her birthday?”

“July 20th.”

That gives us three whole weeks. That’s plenty of time to order something, or even to make something. The next most important thing is Aikawa’s interests and tastes. We need to make sure we choose something that’ll make her happy.

I asked Shingo what his girlfriend’s hobbies were and what

kind of things she liked.

His response was surprising: “Well, that’s the thing. I’ve never asked her about that stuff, so I don’t know.”

What do you mean you don’t know?! How can you have so little interest in your own girlfriend?! I grabbed Shingo by the shoulders, and gave him a good shaking while I scolded him.

Shingo’s eyes filled with tears, and he began apologizing. “I’m sorry! I was kind of embarrassed, so I couldn’t ask her. Though I did hear her say she likes hot springs.”

Hot springs? I like those, too! All right! That settles it.

I grabbed Shingo by the shoulders again, and declared, “We’ll dig up a hot spring!”

“Buh hee?!” Shingo cried. His eyes seemed to say, “What are you talking about?”

I explained to him that if Aikawa liked hot springs, if Shingo dug up a hot spring especially for her, she was bound to love him all the more.

What’s more, if it was a hot spring we’d dug up ourselves, we could use it whenever we liked without having to pay, and we could bathe in it as much as we liked. And there’d be no one else around to bother us! It was the new perfect frontier for us.

I passionately explained this to Shingo, but he had questions about the particulars.

“But, what about the land? I’m sure we’d need help with the expenses and the labor involved.”

“Naturally, I’ve thought about that. We just have to buy some

land!”

Shingo didn't seem to have checked his account balance recently, but reward funds had been deposited into each of our accounts after we'd discovered a treatment for the European tragedy. The sum had been an incredible \$500 million. If Shingo and I combined our reward money, we could even build a palace.

As for the labor, we could probably handle that using our own powered suits. I even had an idea about the specialist advice we'd need to successfully dig into a hot spring.

“Buh hee. I'm starting to think this could work.” Shingo was becoming enthusiastic, too.

“Now we just need to figure out where to start,” I said.

As I was considering what we'd do next, Shingo started to look worried. “Are you sure about this, Kouki?” he asked. “Isn't there something else you'd rather use your reward money on?”

“Shingo, this is exactly the kind of thing I want to use my money for,” I said with a smile. “Stop worrying about that. Help me make plans.”

“Thank you,” replied Shingo sounding pleased.

I don't know why he's worrying about that. Once it's finished, Alice and I can use it, too!

“Do you think we should look for a hot spring in the Hakone area?” I asked.

“Buh hee. That's probably the best place to look for hot springs.”

Shingo and I relocated to my house, where we started to form

detailed plans.

For the location, we'd buy a plot of land in the middle of a mountain in Hakone. The surrounding views would be one advantage, but the main reason was that there'd be no other people there to get in our way.

Next, we thought about the building that we'd put next to the hot spring. We decided it would be a building from overseas that we'd have dissembled and reassembled at the new location. This led to a problem...

"Let's make it a Baroque castle!" I exclaimed.

"Buh hee! That's hardly tasteful. We should make it a Gothic cathedral!"

Shingo and I had completely different standards when it came to the building. Our ideas were completely incompatible, but neither of us wanted to compromise. We decided to talk to my mom to settle the matter.

Mom looked at us as if we were garbage. "Wasn't this hot spring meant to be a present for a girl?" she said. "Why would you choose some tasteless building that looks like it's full of ghosts and vampires? It should be obvious that a beautiful Ottoman palace would be the right choice."

Asking Mom was clearly a mistake...

In the end, Shingo and I decided to ask Clare, the rocket person who'd taken good care of us during the terrorist attack. We sent our three opinions to the email address she'd given us, and after 10 minutes, we received a reply.

"I'm rejecting all of those ideas. All of those buildings will stand out too much, so I think they're best avoided. Make it a log

house with a warm and gentle feel to it.”

Now that Clare had provided the voice of reason, we decided to have a log house imported. As for the land, that required some legal procedures, so we decided to buy it with my mom acting as the official owner.

We won't be able to do anything more unless we actually go to a place where we can dig for the hot spring, I realized. I suggested to Shingo that we use our vacation time to do the work.

His response wasn't what I'd expected. "I've finished my end of term tests, so I could just skip school. There's nothing you particularly need to do at the academy, is there?"

We sent emails to our respective girlfriends, telling them that, "We're going to be studying insect ecology for the next three weeks." With that, all of our preparations were complete, and three days later, we were headed for a mountain in Hakone.

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Setting out from a town at the foot of the mountain, we used my powered suit to fly to the land we'd bought. Naturally, Shingo was also wearing his powered suit, and I carried him with me. We also had as many of the necessary materials as I could carry.

It really is right in the middle of the mountainside, I noticed. There's nothing to see but the forest surrounding us. I guess that's a good thing...

"Kouki, we're about to arrive at the destination," Shingo told me via a transmission while he checked the map. "Increase your altitude so I can clear some space."

Following his instruction, I climbed to 200 meters.

“I’m going to drop them now,” Shingo told me before dropping some of the land-clearing dynamite he’d brought with him.

The dynamite had been set to go off five meters above the ground, and it had the effect that we’d expected. All of the trees within a ten meter radius were blown over, creating a place to land.

I landed in the space we’d just created, and we continued our work without rest. We placed another ring of dynamite around the circumference before taking to the air again.

“Buh hee! Buh hee hee hee hee hee.”

We repeatedly planted explosive charges while Shingo repeatedly laughed his weird laugh, and more trees were blown down each time. Before long, we’d cleared a large enough area of land.

Shingo... We actually want to use those trees we’ve blown over. Don’t destroy them completely.

“Should we put the excavator here?” I asked.

“Yeah. Support it so it doesn’t fall over. I’ll operate it from here.”

Once we were done clearing the land, we set up a large excavator, and started digging for an underground water channel that would form our hot spring.

We’d asked a geologist, someone we’d met during our visit to the new metals development department in the Next-Generation Scientific Research Institute, to predict where water channels were most likely to be.

Once the excavator had planted an anchor sufficiently deep into the ground, our work was done for the day. Now we just had

to leave it until morning, at which point we expected that a hot spring would be flowing up from the water channel.

I took to the sky again while carrying Shingo, and we flew back toward the town at the foot of the mountain, where we'd reserved rooms for the night.

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Miki Arakawa's Point of View

To obtain an area of land for Kouki and Saito, I had to visit the National Administrative Office. I didn't think there'd be any problem with Kouki owning some land himself, but there were actually a lot of complicated procedures to deal with aside from the land ownership. There's a lot of diverse and complicated red tape that I had to deal with, such as the permit for using the hot spring water and the building permit for the building.

"I thought there was nothing Kouki didn't know, but he is just a child, after all," I murmured.

Kouki was always solving all of his own problems, so I was delighted that he'd asked his mother to help him with a personal project. I suppose that was why I'd suddenly shown up at a government office without remembering to make an appointment.

"My name is Miki Arakawa," I told them. "I'm hoping to speak with a manager about a plot of land."

I knew I couldn't expect them to arrange a meeting when I'd shown up without warning, so I used the name Arakawa to grease the wheels a little. As expected, I was soon granted a meeting with a manager, and guided into a room. For some reason, the manager looked terrified and was sweating profusely.

"A-Are you preparing for a coup d'état?!" he asked. "We don't want to be involved. Please talk to someone at the Cabinet Office or the Self-Defense Force Headquarters!"

Where would he get that idea? I wondered. I just want to talk about buying some land for Kouki and the associated rights.

"Understood! We'll grant permission for whatever, so please

spare me my life!!” he added, while handing over a stamped settlement document.

Now it's going to look as though I've used threats to force him into giving me what I want! I thought I could use the name Arakawa to force my way into this meeting, but this is getting out of hand. It's going to make Kouki and Saito look bad, too.

Two hours later, I'd politely explained everything and cleared up the misunderstanding. I left the meeting room with signatures on all of the necessary documents. It was only when I reached the exit to the government office that I realized why the manager had been so afraid.

“Well, this would explain it,” I said to myself.

In front of me was the strengthened security team that I'd put together after the terrorist attack. Although they were all displaying United Nations emblems, arriving here with 200 fully armed soldiers, 15 tanks and armored vehicles, and an attack helicopter was bound to cause a misunderstanding.

Maybe this is overdoing it, I thought as I sent Kouki an email to tell him, “Everything went smoothly.”

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Kouki Arakawa's Point of View

“We did it!” I exclaimed.

“Buh hee hee, we finally did it!”

A little more than two weeks after we'd started work on the hot spring, we were finally satisfied with our work.

No hot spring had appeared in the place where we'd first tried digging. The whole thing had taken longer than we'd expected because we'd ended up having to try a further three different places.

Once the hot spring was flowing up, we'd used the trees that had been blown down to build some walls. We'd gotten the water just right by running a pipe underground and having it join with another pipe extending from another underground water channel.

After that, we created a bathing pool lined with rock, and then started assembling the imported log house somewhere where it wouldn't be in the way. Assembling the log house had been so much trouble that I didn't even want to recall the details. To put it briefly, it hadn't been a job that could be comfortably handled by two people.

“That just leaves beds and other everyday necessities,” Shingo said. “Are you going to make a trip home and back to bring them here?”

“No, Clare asked some of her workmates to help. They're going to bring everything here by helicopter. We can head back to the academy to see Alice and Aikawa.”

I decided not to tell Shingo that Clare had emailed me the other day to say, “It'll turn into some sort of hedonist's den if I

leave you and Saito to furnish it, so let me handle that.”

What does she mean by hedonism?! She’s got us all wrong. I was really looking forward to buying canopy beds...

“Kouki, I’m done preparing,” said Shingo as I was muttering complaints to myself.

I stopped my grumbling, and we flew off toward the academy.

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“What?! A hot spring?” Aikawa exclaimed.

We’d already contacted both of the girls to tell them to prepare for an overnight stay and wait for us in the research complex. All that had remained was to tell them our plans.

I watched with a grin as Shingo began bashfully explaining that this was a present for Aikawa.

“So, I remembered you saying you liked hot springs, and I made one with Kouki. We said we were studying insects, but the truth is, we were digging a hot spring the entire time. For your birthday present... could you... accept that?”

Shingo was so tense he couldn’t speak properly, but the meaning was clear: “I’ve dug up a hot spring for you, and now I’m taking you there.”

Aikawa hugged Shingo with delight. Shingo looked thrilled, and I felt as though our hard work had paid off.

I was losing myself in my thoughts when Alice said to me with a smile, “I wonder what I’ll get for my birthday.”

Truth be told, I hadn’t even thought about it, so I just told her,

“It’s a secret.”

Alice climbed into my powered suit, and Aikawa somehow squeezed into Shingo’s powered suit, and we unsteadily flew back to the hot spring. Everything we’d need day-to-day had already been transported to the log house. There was also a letter that had been left on a table, and I read it to myself.

“I’ve brought some items that my older sister Elise and some of my female colleagues helped me choose. I’ve paid for everything from Kouki’s account, so there’s no need to worry.”

After reading the letter, I took a look around. The tables and kitchenware that filled the room certainly did have a certain feminine touch to them. *Isn’t this all a little too fancy?* I worried.

“Megumin! Look how cute this is!” Alice squealed.

“I know! The boys have such great taste!”

The girls seemed to approve, so I tore the letter up into small pieces, and decided we’d take the credit. I looked over at Shingo and he nodded when he saw the look in my eyes. *We just have to hope they don’t find out!*

Next, we need to show them the bathing area, I decided. It’ll be best if they see it by actually bathing in it.

“Okay. Alice and I will go take a bath. No peeping,” Aikawa told me, looking a little embarrassed.

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” I replied, but my thoughts were less pure: *Shingo and I already have it all planned out! I keep telling myself this, but we really have to hope they don’t find out!*

Alice looked me in the eye and softly said, “That’s right. Peeping on me wouldn’t be so bad, but if I caught Kouki peeping on

Aikawa, I'd have to crush him."

What? Crush which part of me?! I was so afraid, it made my stomach hurt.

Aikawa seemed to be thinking the same thing. "Right. if Shin peeps on Alice and not me, I'll crush him, too."

"Buh hee?!" cried Shingo in terror.

The girls left us to think over what they'd just said as they headed to the outdoor bath. We couldn't move.

Has Alice always been this terrifying?

I tried hard to remember, but no answer came to me. Though I did realize one thing... Alice had said, "peeping on me wouldn't be so bad."

That must mean.... Shingo must have remembered that Aikawa had said the same thing to him, because when we looked at each other, we were both grinning broadly. *This year's summer vacation is going to be a lot of fun.*

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Megumi Aikawa's Point of View

I opened the door leading to the outdoor bath, and the bath in front of me was bigger than any I'd ever seen. I'd once visited Noribetsu Hot Spring while staying in a hotel in Hokkaido, but this bath was at least twice as big as that.

"Wow, it's so big! Megumin!" Alice squealed.

Alice was full of innocent joy, but this bath wasn't just big.

I can't imagine how much work it must have been to create this... I thought. Shin asked me, "Could you accept it?" but now that I've seen it, there's no way I could refuse.

"Let's get in," said Alice. She washed her body and then climbed into the bath.

I followed her example, and joined her in the hot water. The water temperature was so perfect that I couldn't help letting out a satisfied, "Fuwaah."

"Ahaha. Megumin, you sound like a cat!"

Alice was making fun of the noise I'd made, but I took no notice, and continued moving further into the bath.

"Megumin, wait." I heard her voice as she followed behind me, but I didn't stop.

With no other visitors around, a lifelong dream of mine had finally come true: *I can swim in the bath!* I moved to the center and took a deep breath before completely immersing myself in water. When I couldn't hold my breath any longer, I lifted my head above the water, and was surprised to see Alice swimming toward me at full speed butterfly style.

“You’re so mean. I can’t believe you’d leave me behind and swim off like that.”

“I’m sorry. I got a little excited,” I said. “But why would you swim after me butterfly style? You should just swim normally.”

“Butterfly is the only swimming style I know,” Alice replied, sounding a little annoyed.

If she can only swim butterfly, does that mean that when she goes to places like the beach with Arakawa, she swims after him at top speed butterfly style? That might look... No, that absolutely must look terrifying. Maybe I should teach her another swimming style?

I considered for a while before asking Alice if she wanted me to.

“Really?” she said. “I want to learn the crawl.”

I wasn’t thinking of that, Alice, I thought with a sigh. What I want to teach you is something more like... how you should swim when you want to have fun with your boyfriend at the beach.

**

After spending some time teaching Alice to swim a new stroke, we sat at the edge of the bath to cool ourselves down. We sat there absentmindedly gazing at the sky.

“We should have brought Kon with us,” said Alice, as though she’d forgotten about Kon until now. “Hm... Maybe he’d be a little shocked if we put him in the hot water?”

I wonder. I’ve never heard of a dragon bathing in a hot spring, even in legends, but I can just imagine Kon surprising

everyone by happily floating in the water.

My thoughts were suddenly interrupted by the sound of a small rocket taking to the air with a *swoosh!* I looked around and saw rockets flying up from near the entrance area.

I wonder what they're doing.

Before I could ask Alice, she'd already begun shouting. "Kouki, what are you doing?"

"We're firing rockets to ward off dangerous animals," he shouted back from some distance away. "Next we're going to launch a firework made by Shingo himself. Make sure you don't miss it."

I had a hard time understanding his answer. *Why don't they just use firecrackers? I don't see why they have to use anything as big as a rocket. Though if I said that to Shin, I can just imagine him replying with some nonsense like, "Buh hee! But those lack passion."*

Shwoosh... Bang.

My head was full of thoughts of Shin as the sky was suddenly illuminated by fireworks. The fireworks might have been a little smaller than those you'd see at a firework show, but they were well-made fireworks that filled the night sky with big beautiful flowers.

"They are so pretty..." said Alice.

I nodded my head in agreement.

As we watched the fireworks, Alice asked me a serious sounding question: "Megumin... what made you fall for Saito?"

I pondered. *I don't know what it was about him... I just started liking him before I'd realized it myself. I remember that at first, my only thoughts about him were, "He's a creepy person with a weird laugh." How could that turn into love?*

I searched through my memories, and found something I remembered very clearly.

My initial impression had begun to change when I'd been searching for something after school. I'd lost a disc containing research data, and Shin had just happened to pass by. He'd helped me look for it for three hours.

When we'd found the disc, I'd expected Shin would ask me for something in return, but all he'd said was, "You must be relieved! Well, I'm going home now." He'd left before I could even thank him. That must have been when I'd started to think of him as a "weird but kind person."

Sometime later, I'd gotten into some trouble with some delinquents in town. They'd grabbed me by the arm and tried to make me go with them, but then I'd heard Shin's voice.

"Hey, let her go."

He'd been shaking a little, but I clearly remembered feeling as though I could depend on him as he'd dropped his heavy bags to the ground to come save me.

As you'd expect, the delinquents had been about to beat up Shin, but then he'd opened one of the bags he'd dropped, and activated Chabane.

Chabane hadn't been able to talk back then, and watching Shin use Chabane to rescue me had caused me to think of Shin as a "weird but cool person with a lot of courage."

I told Alice this, and she said, “So in the end, you still think of him as a weird person.”

“That’s just because he is weird... though I like that part of him, too. But what made you fall for Kouki?”

“It’s a secret.”

I scowled angrily at Alice. Refusing to answer my question after I’d answered hers was hardly fair.

“The fireworks are finished. Shall we get out? We can make plans for this summer vacation over dinner!”

Alice seemed to have noticed that I was glaring at her, and she ran off to the changing room. I looked up into the sky. The fireworks had all disappeared. I decided that next time I’d definitely get an answer to the question that Alice had completely avoided.

This year’s summer vacation is going to be a lot of fun.

**

Baldy's Point of View

I sat with my subordinates eating the portable meal I'd brought for dinner as we sat, hiding near the building where Kouki was staying. The food was cold and far from delicious, but I was hungry, and it was good enough. I ate in silence while resting my back against a well-positioned rock.

"Why'd we have to wind up with a mission like this?" one of my subordinates complained. "Right now, Kouki must be messing around with those cute girls and bathing in the hot spring. Meanwhile, we're out here eating cold food and being bitten by insects... It's so unfair, I can't stand it."

"You're getting paid to be here, aren't you?" I responded. "Stop whining and eat your food. We still don't know everything about the previous attack. This isn't the time to let your guard down."

It was the obvious response, but he continued to grumble as if he didn't accept it. Judging from the looks on the faces of the other members of our group, everyone seemed to share his opinion.

Seems I've no choice... I hadn't been ordered to keep quiet about it, so I decided I'd share certain pieces of information with them.

"This is something that only commanding officers and their superiors know about, but Arakawa didn't just buy the land around that building."

As soon as I began to talk, everyone stopped complaining to listen to what I was saying.

There's nothing to it. They're professionals, so they'll be able

to continue the mission if I can lessen their dissatisfaction for a little while.

I continued, “Naturally, Kouki knows nothing about this. Only the money for the building and the land around it was taken from his account. However, Arakawa bought up all of the land in the surrounding region. She did that because she’s going to create something for us while we’re hiding out here.”

“What’s she going to create?” a curious sounding subordinate asked me.

Before finishing what I’d been saying, I told everyone, “Let’s see tonight’s mission through to the end without complaining.” Once they had all agreed, I went back to what I’d been saying.

I explained, “She wants to create a ‘perimeter base.’ This whole area is going to become a fortress owned by Arakawa. Although it’ll look like an ordinary mountain at a glance, there’ll be an underground fortress here. I don’t know the details myself, but I’ve heard that it’s expected to house 1,800 soldiers and their equipment.

“Arakawa pressured the United Nations into giving her the necessary permissions because she’s had great fears for her son’s safety ever since the previous attack. Essentially... Arakawa is going to command an armed division in Japan secondary only to the self-defense forces. In terms of quality, it might actually be considered the biggest armed division in Japan. There’s no doubt that the legendary Shuuichi and his people will also be stationed here.”

I could see that there was great excitement amongst my subordinates. In short, we were going to be included in the staff housed in that underground fortress. I considered it a great honor.

With Kouki’s brains, Arakawa’s financial resources, and Shu-

uichi's military might, the three of them acting together will be able to bend even the United Nations to their will.

I folded my arms, feeling as though what I was imagining was something to be feared. Just then, there was the sound of a rocket being launched from the direction of the building.

An attack?! Impossible! I was close to panic as we received a wireless communication.

“At present, shots are being fired to drive away dangerous animals as a defense measure.”

I see. In that case, there is no cause for concern. I sat down again, and listened to the conversation my subordinates were having.

“If they build an underground fortress in this area, the bath will definitely be a hot spring! I can’t wait.”

“Right! The female soldiers are going to be pleased, too. If all goes well, maybe we can peep.”

“Speaking of peeping, that reminds me. That Alice girl was cute. Do you think we’d be able to see their bath from here using a scope?”

Just as these idiots were sharing their reckless ideas, there was a great thud as the rock my back was resting against was directly hit by a rocket. For a moment we were all quiet... but then the mastermind behind that reckless idea fell to his knees and looked as though he was about to cry.

I reassured him that it was just coincidence, but in a trembling voice he told me, “But, that rocket didn’t explode.”

I felt a shiver run up my spine when I realized what he was

saying. *What are the odds of one of their rockets flying straight toward us by chance, and then not exploding by chance? It's impossible. It couldn't happen.*

I was certain they had deliberately fired at us. This first shot had merely been a warning shot.

I need to thank the principal for teaching him ethics. When I get back, I'll have to write a report on "The effects of ethics training."

I ordered my subordinates to keep their reckless ideas to themselves from now on.

I don't know if those rockets really do ward off dangerous animals, but that rocket was certainly effective against the dangerous animals who wanted to peep on the girls.

**

Academy Principal Kaori Yamamoto's Point of View

I was sorting papers in my office when I was disturbed by the sound of scratching coming from the door.

Could it be that creature again? I went over to open the door, and found a small dragon standing at my feet.

“Kon!”

It looked at me with an expression that seemed to say, “Hello.” I picked up Kon and took some tomatoes from the fridge. I’d been keeping tomatoes in there ever since the day I’d first met Kon.

As I watched him happily chewing on the tomatoes, I thought back to the first time I’d encountered this small dragon. It must have been the night after the attack on the academy....

There’d been reports stating that the academy was being destroyed and one student had been abducted, and I’d been busy taking calls from various interested parties. The calls had eventually died down, and I’d begun praying for the safe return of the student. That was when I saw Arakawa’s pet enter through the open door.

Arakawa had told me it was a new species of lizard. I wanted to chase it away because I was a little scared of reptiles. Unfortunately, this was Arakawa’s pet, so I couldn’t allow myself to panic in case I injured it. All I could do was watch.

The lizard was looking at me as it made its way toward me. Eventually, it jumped up under the desk, touched some nearby ink, and put its hand to a blank sheet of paper.

“Food, please.” The text was barely legible, but the lizard had

undeniably written the text on the paper before my eyes.

In surprise, I asked it, “What are you? What kind of lizard can understand Japanese?”

In response, it wrote more on the paper: “I’m a dragon. We’re different from lizards. Food, please.”

A dragon... This lizard is calling itself a dragon. I’d normally laugh at the idea, but there was something irritatingly fitting about the idea of Kouki owning a dragon as a pet. It says it wants food, but what can I feed it at a time like this? If anything will do, then I might be able to find something.

I tried asking the dragon what kind of food it wanted.

“I like vegetables,” it wrote. “But anything will do.”

If vegetables are good enough, then I should have some left-over salad from lunch... I handed over the salad, and it began to eat happily. The poor thing must have been quite hungry. It’s so focused on eating.

Once it had finished eating, it once again wrote on the paper. “Thank you. My name is Kon.”

“I see. Nice to meet you, Kon.”

As I petted Kon, I realized that I was smiling. *So many terrible things have happened today... I deserve at least something to soothe me now that it’s over.*

Kon then touched a paperweight on the desk before writing more text on the paper: “Is this iron?”

“Yes, that’s an iron paperweight,” I responded.

Kon's wings began to shine, and then there was a flash of purple light. The iron paperweight had become a sparkling solid gold paperweight.

"A gift in return. I'm leaving now," Kon wrote.

He ambled out of the room the same way he came in.

"Kon? Konnn?"

I realized Kon was calling out to me, and I suddenly came to my senses. He'd finished eating the tomatoes I'd given him. He picked up my fountain pen and on a sheet of paper he wrote, "Thank you for the food. It was delicious."

"Your writing is really getting better," I praised him. He proudly puffed out his chest. It looked so cute that I couldn't help but pet him.

Kon began writing again: "I'd like to show my appreciation. Giving you gold every time feels unsophisticated. Shall we try something else? Please name another precious metal or stone."

That was the first time I could remember feeling lightheaded around Kon. *Does he understand how much this skill of his is worth? I suppose I'll explain it to him some other time...*

For now, I decided I'd have him make a large blue diamond.

Sometime later, Kaori attended the United Nations conference where she was once again praised for overseeing Arakawa Kouki's ethics training. High-ranking officials had decided to give her a monetary reward for her achievements.

Soon after, her love for cars led her to buy a high-class foreign

car. However, the car was more expensive than anything the reward money could have paid for.

Despite many attempts to determine how she'd been able to pay for the car, it remained a mystery.

Extra Chapter: Battle History of the Ghost Unit — Take Control of Enemy Headquarters!

Shuuichi Arakawa's Point of View

We were holed up in a building on the verge of collapse in a town that'd been left in ruin.

At the start of the operation there'd been 1,200 of us, but after an intense counterattack, we now numbered fewer than 100. Only fourteen of us were wearing properly functioning powered suits, myself included. The rest were equipped with just reinforced exoskeletons or were fighting unarmored.

We'd completely lost control of the skies to the enemy forces. The ground forces that we'd expected would assist in our attack on headquarters were not responding, so they had probably been annihilated already.

"It feels as though we're powerless here..." I tried to think of a course of action, exhaling smoke from the cigarette I was holding in my mouth.

My adjutant Louis approached me to say, "I have a report. I've summarized what clear information we have about our current situation. Firstly, we have only fourteen usable powered suits, and of those, just six have enough remaining battery power to engage in combat. We have lost approximately 80% of our heavy weapons, and the 30-millimeter rapid fire rocket launchers and the anti-powered suit rifles that we were relying on have very little remaining ammunition. Morale is high amongst our soldiers, but only 82 of them are still capable of fighting. Fifteen are heav-

ily wounded. The squad that broke off isn't responding, so we can't include them as part of our combat strength. On the basis of the above information, I recommend fully withdrawing from the battle area."

"Unfortunately, I don't have permission to withdraw," I said. "Besides, we aren't going to receive any backup, so how would we be able to escape? We can't be aided by long-range missiles because our communications are down."

Louis simply said, "My apologies," and looked out at the area outside of the building. I also took a look outside as if influenced by his behavior. Unfortunately, my view out of the windows was clouded by smoke and soot from the town's burning buildings.

I remained there gazing out the window until my cigarette had burned down to the filter. Then a thought occurred to me. "Louis..."

"Yes?"

"Can't we use the equipment fitted to the destroyed power suits? If I remember correctly, the suit that Cote was using had a recoilless rifle on its shoulder. Couldn't we remove that, and then install it on the Jeep that has the heavy machine-gun with no bullets left?"

"I think it's possible, though we'd need someone to manually load the next round. It makes sense. We could give that job to someone who isn't wearing a powered suit. If it works, that would definitely give us some more firepower."

Louis had started to act before he'd even finished his sentence. He ordered those capable of moving to remove equipment from the destroyed powered suits.

Okay. We've done something about our lack of firepower.

Now we just need to figure out how to attack enemy headquarters so this operation will be a success...

Even if it wasn't going to be possible to take control of headquarters, we had to at least recover some valuable information, or the mission would be a failure.

I moved away from the window to talk to a group who were smoking cigarettes. "Hey! One of you must have a paper map of the area with you. The electronic jamming is so bad that my terminal doesn't even work properly. And my map got burnt in the fighting earlier."

They began searching the pockets of their combat jackets to see if they'd brought one with them. Several of them looked uncomfortable, as if they'd lost theirs or hadn't even brought a map in the first place.

Fortunately, a sniper named Jonathan was able to produce the map that he'd brought. He removed it from a thick waterproof film and spread it out before me.

"I've been making notes here and there, so it might be difficult to understand. If it's good enough, then please take it."

"Thanks."

Using a drum canister as a makeshift table, I spread out the map and checked the distance between our current location and the headquarters. We seemed to be ten kilometers east of where the target was. I was looking for buildings and facilities in the area that might be of some use to us. I noticed a mark had been drawn roughly eight kilometers north of our position.

Not knowing what to make of it, I asked the map's owner, Jonathan, "What does this mark mean? It's different from the mark used to indicate emergency extraction points."

“That’s a place where the enemy are storing their equipment. I got into a habit of making that kind of marking back when I was part of the United Nations Army’s scout sniper team.”

I’d forgotten that Jonathan was an S-ranked sniper. It was only then that I remembered the excitement it had caused in training when he’d been able to shoot through a watermelon from 600 meters away without using a scope. But I had more important things to think about.

“When you say ‘equipment,’ do you mean there’ll be some sort of transportation like a truck or helicopter? Will there be anything at all that we can use?”

“I do remember that I sighted three large trucks and several motorcycles from a support position two hours earlier.”

So we can at least secure transportation.

I lit my second cigarette and inhaled deeply before making a decision.

“All right! Listen up, everyone! We’re incapable of fighting any longer. That’s why we need to quickly begin withdrawing from this battlefield. Fortunately, Jonathan has marked the location of an enemy storehouse on his map. If we attack that location using our remaining strength, we can secure a means of escape! The enemy will probably be focusing their attention on the area around their headquarters right now. The team defending the storehouse is expected to be very small. We’ll fit the heavy weapons that we’ve removed from the damaged suits to four of your working suits, and we’ll strike using those four suits. Louis will take command over the attack.”

I stopped talking for a while to allow my subordinates to make sense of the information for themselves.

I waited in silence for a full minute before, as expected, several of my subordinates became doubtful and raised their hands to ask questions.

“I have a question. You say that four powered suits are going to participate in the attack, but we have fourteen suits here that are still operational. And what about you, commander? Are you not participating in the operation?”

“That’s right. I’m not participating,” I said. “I’m going to attempt a final attack on the enemy headquarters to distract attention away from the retreating team. Sorry to have to do this, but nine others besides myself are going to have to draw a short straw. If possible, I’d like to limit my request to those who don’t have family...”

As I spoke, I was surprised by my own words. I was asking for someone to willingly accompany me in an attack that would surely result in death. I feared that no one would volunteer and I’d be forced to choose who would accompany me. *If it comes to that, perhaps I should go alone? If I pack as many explosives into my suit as possible, I should be able to buy enough time by myself.*

Before I could open my mouth to speak, several of my subordinates suddenly began laughing. “Commander, I’ve thought this for a long time, but you’ve really got more muscles than brains. No one here wants to withdraw. Just ask anyone.”

“You shouldn’t even have to ask,” another soldier said. “After they’ve given us such a beating, there’s no way we’re running home with our tails between our legs.”

“Let’s show them who they’re messing with! A frontal attack is the last thing they’ll expect, so why not give it a shot?”

You guys think I’m the idiot?! I might have to knock some

sense into these morons. I threw away the cigarette I'd been smoking and was about to start yelling, but then Louis, who had been quietly standing to one side, shook his head and began to speak.

"Commander, it's no good," he said. "No matter how angry you are, no one here is willing to withdraw. Whatever happens, we'll continue to fight under your command to the very end. What you need to do now is command us to attack."

Louis picked up his rifle with a grim smile on his face.

I was at loss for words. My wife Miki was always telling me that I was an idiot, but if I was an idiot, these people were imbeciles. If they're willing to fight until the end, then I wouldn't hold back. *Let's do this together.*

"All right! Let's fight together until the end!! Our target is enemy headquarters! We'll charge on their headquarters until we're down to the very last man!!"

They all responded to my command with a salute. I took a look at the faces of the greatest subordinates I could ask for as I lit my final cigarette.

**

Tracer bullets from a machine gun were flying over my head. Twenty minutes after attempting the attack on headquarters, the outcome was what we should have predicted from the start. We were pinned down by intense machine gun fire in front of the main entranceway.

Having a small number of allies split up while fighting against an already superior enemy seemed to have been a mistake. Squad B had made an attack on the front to secure a way into the headquarters, and we'd been communicating by short-range radio.

However, our radios were now picking up nothing but static.

“Commander, I think Squad B has been wiped out,” Louis informed me. “Our only hope is Squad C and the rocket launcher they’re carrying... If they survived the shelling, they should be about ready to provide supporting fire.”

“You’re right,” I said. “If they don’t provide covering fire within the next five minutes, I intend to put up a smokescreen so we can force our way in. If we don’t do something soon, they’ll level this whole area, and it’ll be all over.”

Louis nodded in response to my instruction and began to prepare a smoke bomb that he produced from a chest pocket.

We’re counting on you Squad C! If you don’t hurry, we won’t be able to wait any longer.

I got lower to the ground as I felt the vibrations of nearby mortar impact, and I felt ready to pray.

Finally, we heard the radio transmission we’d been waiting for: “This is Squad C! I’m in position, and ready to fire. But I’m the only one left alive after we were shelled. I’d like to change our original plan: Instead of offering covering fire to control the area, I’d like to destroy the front entrance of the headquarters! As soon as I’ve fired a rocket, the enemy will probably determine my location, so one rocket is all the support I can offer. Once the entranceway has been destroyed, Squad A can rush in. I hope you’re okay with that!”

In addition to the sound of his voice, I could hear that gunshots were already being fired on the area around the last surviving squad member. It seemed we weren’t the only ones in a perilous situation.

I prepared for the impact of the rocket and readied myself to

leap out at any moment. A few seconds later, there was a great rumbling sound and the entrance was blown apart, opening up the way ahead!

“Create a smokescreen! Let’s go. Everyone move out!” I yelled.

We charged into the remains of the entrance, which was still smoking from the explosion, and we charged toward the control room. A further six of my subordinates were taken down on the way there, but I remained focused on constantly moving forward. We soon reached a large door.

I looked back to speak some words of encouragement to my subordinates, who were down to just five men. “If we can break through the hall on the other side of this door, we’ll have reached the final stretch to the control room! We’re almost there. Don’t get careless now.”

We blew open the door and we entered the hall. Inside, dozens of fully armed soldiers were aiming their guns at us. In the center stood Miki. She was holding a bulletproof shield and was protected by a powered suit.

“You did your best, Shuuichi. But I win,” Miki said with a smile.

The instant Miki snapped her fingers, Clare’s voice could be heard across the entire battleground—the United Nations Large-Scale Training Facility.

“Total annihilation of the attacking side confirmed. Large-Scale Exercise A-52 has now concluded. All participating squads should make haste and return to their standby positions to begin debriefing.”

At the sound of her voice, Louis, who was “dead,” slowly climbed to his feet and walked over to me. He shrugged his shoul-

ders and breathed a sigh.

Don't sigh at me... It's a miracle we got so far after being so hopelessly outgunned! And I've never been in a training exercise where we didn't have air support or even ground support.

"Louis, don't look so down," I said. "We never could have won."

"But..."

"Save your breath. Was there even a point to this stupid training exercise? It was ridiculous to think that we could turn the situation around with just the firepower we had on hand. Withdrawing was the only sensible option."

I was trying to cheer Louis up, but I made sure I was speaking loud enough for Miki to hear. Miki had been the one who had suggested this training exercise to the top brass in the first place, but I had no idea why she'd done it.

What was the point in fighting when the situation was so completely hopeless? I scowled at Miki and waited for her to explain herself.

"Please don't scowl at me like that," she said. "I understand how illogical this exercise seemed. But it was Kouki who had the idea for this training exercise."

"What?! He came up with this exercise? What's he expecting from us?"

"I don't know," she said. "A while ago, he looked at a manual while visiting a self-defense force facility with me. Afterward, he was absorbed in inputting something to his personal terminal. When I took a look, the content was the training exercise we performed today."

If Kouki is involved, does that mean that this training exercise has some important meaning? I don't think he's the type to waste time on something meaningless. The state of world affairs had recently left me feeling uneasy. Damn. In that case, the top brass should have told me this from the start! I don't know about the other troops participating, but if we'd known Kouki was involved, that would have changed everything about how we'd approached this exercise. But now isn't the time for this. We need to start the debriefing so we can smooth out the problems we encountered this time.

After promising Miki we'd eat dinner together later, I hurried back to the standby point.

In 2097, a year after this training exercise, armed conflict broke out in a small country in South America. The United Nations immediately decided to send in their standing army and dispatched troops to the area. The battlefield and the strategy used were remarkably similar to “Large-Scale Training Exercise Case A-52.”

As a result, the head of every nation came to fear the name of “Kouki Arakawa.”

The story of how this led to the signing of the Arakawa Pact in 2102 was well-known in the dark corners of the world.

Afterword

Nice to meet you. This is Nyun.

I'd like to express my gratitude to everyone who has chosen to read this book. Also to Raifuu-sama, Higure no Michi Ginjou-sama, Yuuri-sama, and Miru Porun-sama for drawing insert pictures for me on the *Shōsetsuka ni Narō* website.

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It's thanks to everyone's support that my crude novel has actually turned into a published work. To tell you the truth, it still doesn't feel real.

In winter of last year, I was approached by Overlap who wanted to talk about creating a book. It feels like the time has gone by in an instant since then.

I will always have great respect for S-sama, who went to the trouble of coming to Hokkaido in the middle of winter to explain publishing to me, and who was then ready to talk everything through with me in detail in the time that followed.

I fondly remember the time we used Skype to hold a meeting, but then we got into a discussion about something else, and before we knew it, we'd spent about five hours talking about things that were completely unrelated.

I'm truly grateful to the illustrator Sakana-sama for providing the beautiful insert images. When I first saw them, I spent about an hour staring at them and grinning. I've actually set the lock screen image on my phone to one of the first rough images I received.

When I selfishly said, "I want to see a cool-looking drawing of a powered suit," Sakana-sama met my wishes perfectly. I barely have any sense when it comes to drawings, so these insert images that were drawn from my explanations seem like magic to me.

How did you like this novel? The theme is misunderstandings, so I tried my best to express the differences in feelings between the main character and the other characters skillfully. As the author, I'd be pleased if you were able to laugh at the absurd and surrealistic way that the main character Kouki and his mother Miki increasingly find some shared understanding of each other.

Foreshadowing for the next volume has been scattered throughout this first volume, causing some differences from the web version.

I'll give you a small hint: During the Second World War, one piece of foreshadowing is that the country that should have been the "Soviet Union" is actually "Russia." I'd be pleased if you find other parts that make you think, "Hm?" and wonder what they're foreshadowing.

Furthermore, the world in which the story takes place in this book is different from that of the web version. The print version is a "What if?" story that looks at the web version and asks, "What

would have happened if they'd made a different choice at that time?" Slightly different choices and changes to a conversation transform this story into one possible "what could have happened" story.

That's why I'd encourage everyone reading this book to also read the web version published on *Shōsetsuka ni Narō*. As you read, you'll find yourself thinking, "Huh? This part is different."

This afterword has gotten quite long, so I'd like to leave it at this until next time.

Everyone, please look forward to our next meeting in the second volume.